

---

# HINDU POPES

India seems to be imitating Europe's medieval past

Ramachandra Guha

When the Babri Masjid was demolished in December 1992, a prominent mahant of Ayodhya called it the first step in making the town the "Vatican of the Hindus". I was recently reminded of that statement while reading the Oxford historian R.W. Southern's classic *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*. This book skilfully sets medieval Christianity in its social context. Southern analyses the relations between church and state, and the economic bases of both. He foregrounds the primacy of the papacy, yet tells us also about the monastic orders which attracted some of the ablest minds of the time.

Reading Southern, I asked myself - where would I find a comparable account of Hinduism? Where is the book that elegantly and authoritatively maps out the different theological trends, sects, orders and authorities that make up this particular religious complex? So far as I know, no such study exists. For religious history is an undeveloped field in India, despite the diversity of faiths to be found in the subcontinent, and despite the continuing hold of religion on the popular imagination.

As a scholar, I hope that works like *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* will inspire comparable studies of Indian religious traditions and institutions. Meanwhile, as a citizen, I was struck by the parallels between Christianity as it was practised in medieval Europe, and the contemporary Indian movement known as Hindutva. Consider the following.

One, medieval Christianity was obsessed with defeating Islam, viewed as the main and sometimes sole enemy. Representative here is a letter written in 1267 by the pope in Rome to the Greek emperor in Constantinople. "The Crusade is being prepared," wrote the pope, "and the whole of Europe is rising at our bidding. If you will attack the Moslems on one side while the Crusaders attack them on the other, we shall see an end of their damnable religion for ever."

Two, the Vatican drew much of its authority from the presence of the physical remains of Jesus's proselytizing apostle St Peter, he who brought the faith to the previously pagan terrain of Europe. Rome was the "most holy burial place of the most blessed body of St Peter". The pope was the representative of St Peter; St Peter the representative of Jesus; and Jesus the son of god. Having the apostle's remains buttressed the Vatican's claim to be the centre of the Christian community. In a similar fashion, the association of Ram, the best loved incarnation of Vishnu, with Ayodhya, shall justify that city's claim to be the Vatican of Hinduism.

Three, medieval Christianity was a centralized, quasi-totalitarian, political system. Thus the edicts of the influential 11th century

pope, Gregory VII, proclaimed that "the pope can be judged by no one"; that "an appeal to the papal court inhibits judgment by all inferior courts"; that the pope "alone can make new laws, set up new bishoprics, and divide old ones"; and, most importantly, that "the Roman church has never erred and never will err till the end of time".

This credo reminds one of communism in its pomp. Neither Mao nor Lenin were ever known to have made a mistake. Nor, I believe, has the sarsangchalak of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

Four, the pope and his bishops were especially keen to gain the allegiance, and preferably obeisance, of the political rulers of the day. As Southern observes, the church authorities were always at pains to emphasize "the inferiority of the secular to the spiritual power". Kings and nobles had continually to defer to the pope. Much is the case with modern day Hindutva. Our prime minister bows and scrapes before the shankaracharya, and our chief ministers are sworn in before rows upon rows of bearded gentlemen dressed in saffron.

Five, while some religious leaders had a genuine interest in matters of the spirit, some others were more keen on matters of the mundane world. In the historical record, says Southern, there are "few signs that the cultivation of (a Christian) character was the main preoccupation of the bishops of the western church. It is as organizers, administrators, magnates and politicians that the surviving documents mainly depict them". Likewise, a future historian studying the periodical literature of the India of the Nineties is likely to conclude that sants and sadhus preferred politics and administration to theology and doctrine. Southern writes of a particular German bishop that he was "simply a political agent in ecclesiastical dress". Much the same could be said of many of our Hindu holy men today.

Six, notwithstanding the professed ideals of the church, then, "secular motives were everywhere uppermost and everywhere prevailed". In the 12th and 13th centuries, writes Southern, "many contemporaries were beginning to think that the church was a conspiracy between secular and ecclesiastical authorities for the exploitation of ecclesiastical wealth." How true this is of so many temples today.

Seven, as men of this world, the clergy took most interest in their own well-being. Southern calls the priesthood "the greatest of all trade unions" in the Middle Ages. Hindu swamis likewise have been quick to understand the importance of acting collectively in their own self-interest.

---

Sociologists have written of Hindutva as being an attempt to "Semiticize" Hinduism. By this they mean that a previously plural, diffuse, unorganized and even anarchic religion is being refashioned along more formal lines. Hindutva aims to create a clear chain of command, a definite centre of authority, where previously there was none. For Hindus have failed to act as a unified, cohesive community, complains the sangh parivar. They have been hampered by the absence of one holy book, a Quran or a Bible, and the absence of one holy place, a Rome or a Mecca. Ram, and Ayodhya, will be made to step into the breach.

Of the three great religions that are "Semitic" in origin, Judaism has had the least influence in India. But Islam and Christianity have both made a powerful impact on the subcontinent. Indeed, much of modern day Hinduism can be understood as a response to the challenge of those two faiths. Some Hindus, like Gandhi, were provoked by Islam and Christianity to attack the evils in their own society, such as discrimination against women and low castes. Other Hindus, such as those clustered in the sangh parivar, seem to have

taken an altogether different lesson from the Semitic religions. From them they have learnt to blur the boundaries between church and state, to claim infallibility for their own faith, and to demonize other faiths.

Karl Marx once claimed that "the more developed society shows to the less developed the image of its future". In this, as in so much else, the bearded German prophet got it wrong. For modern India seeks to emulate medieval, not modern, Europe. Sadly, this is true both for Hindutva and for its political opponents. The apostles of the sangh parivar are inspired by long dead mullahs and padres; but so, it seems, are men such as Laloo Prasad Yadav. Listen now to this final quote from R.W. Southern's *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*: "Nepotism, political bribery, and the appropriation of institutional wealth to endow one's family, were not crimes in medieval rulers; they were part of the art of government, no less necessary in popes than in other men." India's present, Europe's past? ■

---

## Show & Tell in Abu Ghraib

What are the thousand words, I wonder, that are worth the pictures of grinning US soldiers sexually humiliating Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison? An essay by Michael Ignatieff about human rights as the justification for war? An article by Samuel Huntington on the superiority of Western values? A rousing column by Tom Friedman calling on America to make Iraq a modern democratic state? Maybe Bernard Lewis could write up a talk about Islamic paranoia, or perhaps Alan Dershowitz could reprise in an op-ed his argument that torture can be morally permissible--a view that found a ready, even gleeful, hearing, I seem to remember, in journalistic circles after 9/11...

The fact is, whatever the reason or excuse, however unrepresentative those photos are ever shown to be--and whatever punishment is eventually meted out to the perpetrators--the United States has just lost its last remaining rationale for the misbegotten invasion of Iraq. The WMDs are missing, the nuclear weapons never existed (even the "nuclear weapons program" has been dead since 1991); you don't hear much anymore about Saddam having been behind 9/11, although thanks to the media's slavish channeling of White House propaganda, 70 percent of Americans will probably go their graves believing him Osama's best friend. Now the rescue of the Iraqi people from tyranny and brutality is turning out to be another fantasy. The humanitarian argument persuaded a lot of people--good people--to give this war the benefit of the doubt. Does anyone still think Iraqis are about to shower their invaders with roses and sweetmeats?

Courtesy, *The Nation*, Katha Pollit.