‘The temple was not a Vedic institution’

In your book, you posit two approaches to studying Hinduism: the ‘primordialist’ and the ‘constructionist’. Can you elaborate?

Until very recently, it was believed that Hinduism was one of the oldest religions in the world. Its beginnings were placed in mid-second millennium BCE which is the date generally assigned to the Rig Veda. At times, its antiquity was pushed back to early half of the third millennium BCE, when Harappan urbanism began to develop. This view, which lays emphasis on Hinduism’s putative antiquity, is what I have called the primordialist position. Opposed to this, an interesting body of writings produced in recent decades argues that Hinduism, as an idea and an identity, is not older than the 19th century. This is the constructionist approach. The constructionists show greater awareness about the political and economic processes that enable or assist the making of religious identities. In their understanding, religious identities – such as Hindu, Muslim, Christian – are consciously constructed under specific historical conditions. They hold that such identities do not exist in any essential or homogeneous form for several hundred years. Informed by this historical insight, it has been possible for constructionist research to show that the making of a Hindu religious identity does not antedate the early 19th century.

You have argued that inherited religious identities only existed for specialist ‘renouncer’ communities and were non-existent among the laity before 1000 CE...

Constructionist research has made us sceptical of the claim that Hinduism is more than 3,000 years old. Nevertheless, historians have shied away from extending its insights to explore the emergence of religious identities per se in the Indian subcontinent. A close examination of the sources shows that these identities were monastic in nature before 1000 CE. Until the close of the first millennium CE it was possible to become a Buddhist or a Jaina or a Shaiva or Vaishnava only by initiation as a monk or nun. Religious identity was the preserve of a renouncer, and did not extend to the laity. It was not inherited. This changed between 1000 and 1200 CE in what is arguably among the most momentous of historical transformations in India. In these centuries, local elites – including peasant proprietors, merchants, chiefs, and warlords – began to associate themselves with religious life on a hitherto unnoticed scale. Temple building was the means through which this relationship found expression. The laity now flaunted religious identities and bequeathed them as inheritance.

How did the sudden interest in temple building lead to the formation of separate religious groups?

The oldest written references to temples are from 300 and 400 CE, and the earliest surviving temple structures date back to 500 and 600 CE. The temple was not a Vedic institution. Its origin was intertwined with the evolution of pooja, a form of idol worship based on the agamas and tantras, different from the sacrifice-based worship of the Vedas. Not surprisingly, temple worship was met with resistance from the Vedic orthodoxy.

By 700 CE, the Pallavas of Kanchipuram, the Chalukyas of Badami, and other such monarchical states had begun to promote temple building. What happened between 1000 and 1200 CE was an unprecedented proliferation in temple building. I have been able to count as many as 170 temples built in these two centuries from a mere eight taluks in Karnataka.

A major fallout was that the focus of religious life shifted to the temple. With inheritable land endowed for its maintenance, the temple became an economically autonomous institution, wielding great power and influence. It helped in cementing the agrarian and other economic relations of the day as well as in forging new ties of trade, kinship, marriage and fealty.

Your book looks at the growth of monasteries in the 15th and 16th centuries, and the guru emerging as an authority figure. What are the parallels, if any, with today’s godmen?

The guru emerged as a major figure at about the same time as the making of religious identities among the laity. From the 12th century onwards, we find him an indispensable part of religious life. As we reach the 15th and 16th centuries, our sources give the impression that all of religious life hinges on the guru. There is an intimate bond between guru and disciple, which lasts for a lifetime and spills over into the next birth as well. Long-standing texts and practices retain their significance only to the extent that they find endorsement from the guru. We must remember that for much of history, the masses were an unlettered lot. As late as 1901, the literacy level in India was just over 5%. It is not unreasonable to erudite textual traditions made way for the guru as source of knowledge and deliverance.

I don’t think there are parallels in our times. There has, of course, been a proliferation of godmen since the early 1980s. This has a history of its own. These godmen have much to say on religion and ethics, but the experience of the divine they speak of is no match to that of saints from the recent past – Ramana Maharshi, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Nisargadatta Maharaj. Our godmen have made a name not so much by religious experiences as through instructions in healthy living, stress reduction, fitness through yoga, meditation and pranayama, etc. They have a clientele that’s mostly urban, middle-class, espousing neoliberal capitalism, and lamenting the death of tradition.

At least two other factors have led to the rise of godmen. The most important activity of godmen is real estate management. Article 26 confers the right to acquire and manage property in the name of religion. This is a foundational right. The second factor is the emergence of private television channels since the early 90s, which helped many godmen to expand businesses exponentially.

Your comments on the brouhaha over Jack Dorsey holding up a placard saying ‘Smash Brahminical Patriarchy’?

I find such slogans very interesting for a rather bizarre reason. They embody a strange contradiction as it were, for they occur as value-loaded expressions even when they are semantically hollow. The word ‘Brahminical’ is reduced to a porous signifier that can contain anything and everything that a progressive mind abhors. It is in this sense similar to the shallow ways in which terms such as ‘fetish’ and ‘medieval’ are used as adjectives for anything that is authoritarian and undemocratic. The time is perhaps ripe now for us to admit that progressive movements in India have not only used the word ‘Brahminical’ with little sense of awareness or discretion, but have dogmatised it beyond redemption, even by the standards of mediocre political rhetoric.

The interviewer is a filmmaker, columnist and scholar. When not travelling, he hangs out with his cats, toucans and pet iguana.