

Title—Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India

Author—Peter Van der Veer

Year—1994

Categories: Religion, Indian Subcontinent, Politics, Colonialism

Place: Indian Subcontinent

Time: 1850-1990

Argument Synopsis:

Van der Veer's book provides an overview of religious nationalism in India, arguing that nationalism is a discourse that transforms preexistent forms of culture. Religious nationalism in India has a history of its own, which cannot be reduced to the master narrative of European modernity. The book addresses the seeming paradox of tradition and modernity within nationalist movements. Specifically, Van der Veer studies the development of nationalism in India during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a focus on the dynamics of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh socioreligious formations; he asks how they were and were not shaped by forces of colonialism and orientalism. In terms of sources, he relies on a variety of case studies as well as supporting data drawn from his earlier works. He attempts to demonstrate how traditional ritual practices and beliefs have been employed selectively by modern ideologues and politicians to mobilize mass movements and parties for the sake of political power. Van der Veer argues that religious identity is constructed through ritual discourse and practice. He notes that he is not attempting to provide a narrative history of religious nationalism in India. Underscoring the work is engagement with the debates concerning orientalism, nationalism and colonialism, modernism and secularism, and tolerance and syncretism.

His book is organized into six chapters that both thematic and broadly chronological, starting in the nineteenth century up through the almost present day (as of publication). The second chapter explores the expansion of religious organizations and state formation as parallel processes. He finds commonalities between Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh movements and relates them to precolonial patterns of social organizing. Chapter three argues that nationalist projects adopted the familial idioms of ritual and its gendered rhetoric of violence both to mark and subjugate others and to solidify a national self. Van der Veer stresses that nationalist ritual is deeply invested in the control of feminized sexuality. In this chapter, he juxtaposes the gendered politics of the Hindu Cow Protection Movement and Muslim nationalist's preoccupation with covering women's bodies.

Van der Veer then turns to discussions of the nationalization of time and space. The fourth chapter demonstrates that extra-local frames of religious belonging were available before colonialism in the forms of pilgrimage, trade circuits, and military campaigns. In chapter five, Van der Veer examines nationalism's combination of anti-historical features of religious discourse with the empiricist search for the facts of a national past. Here he discusses how 'the Muslim' is figured differently in two similar sounding Hindu campaigns—the reclamation of temples at Somnath and Ayodhya. The last chapter reviews the language politics of the Indian nation-state and underscores the importance of mass-mediated transnational circuits in the formation of nationalism. Van der Veer argues against the hegemonic status on the role of orientalism and the role of the state.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Ritual provided the crucial linkage between religious and national identities
- Objectification and homogenization of culture promoted by neo-traditionalists is produced through systematic exclusions of internal and external others
- Religious nationalisms in South Asia have their roots in, but are different from, sectarian movements which long preceded the colonial divide and ruling policies of the British