

Beyond Nationalism: Faith Movements as Transnational Communities

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Summary

The paper will argue that Faith Movements in India like the Ramakrishna Mission, the Self Realization Fellowship and The Art of Living Foundation can be looked at as transnational communities in their own right by offering cosmopolitan religiosity rather than religious universalism as their ideal.

Content

Theoretical Preliminaries: A shared tenet of many of the disparate strands in the discourse concerning cosmopolitanism that looks beyond the boundaries of the nation-state, is the desire to reconfigure world society as a community joined by a common thread of social justice, and common good which could be articulated as “emergent social order that extends political rights beyond exclusivist territorial boundaries” (Papastergiadis 2011) or “universal political communion with justice” (Jazeel 2011) etc. In this context, the paper will posit religious communities of transnational social movements, such as the New Religious Movements in India as imagined communities where national boundaries do not matter. Ulrich Beck in his book *A God of One’s Own: Religion’s Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence* (2010) offers, as a part of the framework of “reflexive modernization”, a strong case for individualization and cosmopolitization of religion. He suggests that as globalization erodes cultural boundaries and exposes people to diverse faiths, a de-territorialization of the traditional cultural systems takes place and the rigidity of institutionalized religions is resisted in favour of more personal, “individualized” religion(s). This radicalized religious freedom also offers a new definition of God, who is “a personal God who has a firm place and a clear voice in the intimate heart of one’s own life”. Beck also foregrounds here, the

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peace-building capacity of religion in the modern world. Although Beck mostly focuses on Christianity in the west, he indicates that a cross-cultural research is required before judgments can be made about the wider applicability of his thesis. In the proposed paper therefore, I would like to explore the resonances of Beck's theory with the Indian religious public sphere. For this I will consider three New Religious Movements- The Art of Living Foundation, Ramakrishna Mission and Self Realization Fellowship to understand these religious social movements as transnational communities in their own right. These religious societies are all regionally rooted and globally connected through sophisticated urban channels wherein identity formation and perceived common good is the intended outcome. Their geographical footprint and the ideological underpinnings will be looked into, in order to ascertain the function played by them in contemporary society. The paper will thereby inquire religiously inspired cosmopolitan consciousness in the light of the various critical perspectives on cosmopolitanism. Tentative Arguments The paper will thus argue that Faith Movements in India like the Ramakrishna Mission, the Self Realization Fellowship and The Art of Living Foundation can be looked at as transnational communities in their own right by offering cosmopolitan religiosity rather than religious universalism as their ideal. These transnational imagined communities are formed around the figure of the guru, who serves as a godhead and the organization, with its own set of sacred geography, philosophy and iconography; and an element of Seva or service to humanity as a tenet associated with each. All these elements come together and serve as a binding force around which the community defines itself and its place in the society. The paper will inquire into these movements for their potential in inspiring a "cosmopolitan consciousness" by trying to remain preeminently multicultural, while also emphasizing upon the moral sensibility and issues of social concern. What is significant about the above mentioned faith based groups is that they do not go with an isolated orthodox view, cut away from contemporary reason and rationality, rather they represent themselves as modern day organizations, by highlighting the scientific elements in of Yoga, and meditation. Beck calls this attitude "post-modern" religiosity as the individuals, instead of having to choose between religion or rationality, appropriate both the aspects together, or "a new equality between religious and scientific knowledge" (Beck 2010, 134). Furthermore, the paper will also look into Beck's work on the role of religion in modern, "post secular" European society, with the ideas of "cosmopolitan constellation", "cosmopolitan religiosity" and "post-modern religiosity" etc and discuss a wider applicability of his thesis, especially in the Indian context. Finally the paper will also try to question the assumptions associated with religious nationalism in India and try to demonstrate that different publics may indeed be attracted to different elements within the same religious community. Whilst there can be many counterpoints to this argument, for instance such Faith Movements have often been looked at as signifiers of globalized Hinduism, the paper, taking a consideration to these issues will try to understand the various reasons associated with the rise of such Faith

based movements like the rising middle class in India, capital flows, western education and seek to measure their potential in creating a cosmopolitan consciousness.

References

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