Foreword

Though this book by Prof. Anil Kumar Vaddiraju is small, it is profound and thought-provoking. The reader will have to go through it slowly with concentration, reflecting over and savouring each sentence, paragraph, chapter and then the book as a whole. The reward will be rich insights and joy of better understanding a troublesome problem affecting our complex world.

The focus of the book is on the steady rise of religion and tradition in the world, including in the developing part of it, taking India particularly. India is not taken here as unique, but as a special example. The two words, religion and tradition, are often, though not always, used interchangeably in the book, with the distinction between the two taken as of no pertinent significance. The book is not about the dominance of religion or tradition during the ancient and medieval periods, but about its surprising rise in the post-modern age in spite of all the progress in science and technology and urbanisation, with widespread progress of democracy and liberal ideas.

With the Enlightenment Movement in Western Europe during the 17th and 18th Centuries, the emphasis had shifted from religion to reason, which led to modernity. It was a movement which had a wide influence. It did not take place in a vacuum but had been preceded by the Scientific Revolution which emerged after 1500 AD and transformed people's attitudes to nature. It was the time when modern science was born, leading to the Industrial Revolution during the 18th and 19th Centuries. The Scientific Revolution in turn was preceded by the Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century, which challenged the authority of the Church, and gave the individual much more freedom and scope for the exercise of reason, not only in the secular but also in the religious social spheres. The State also was freed from the clutches of the Church, making the rise of liberalism and secular democracy possible. The French Revolution brought to the fore the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, giving feudalism a mortal blow. Religiosity was replaced by Humanism as the guiding principle of ethics, as a major outcome of the rise of reason. As the author observes, 150 years of religious wars taught the importance of religious tolerance. Creative and progressive forces had thus emerged which changed the globe widely and irreversibly, not only

in science and technology but also in politics, economy, society and religion. It is against this background that the global recrudescence of religion and tradition has taken place in the post-modern age, which needs to be understood. The present book is a welcome contribution towards this task.

Anil Kumar probes into this phenomenon with the help of three perspectives, respectively: Modernisation, Marxism and Hermeneutics (Gadamer-Habermas Debate).

It is understandable that the forces of modernisation were expected to push religion from the public to the private sphere and from dominance to marginalisation in politics. But it happened so to a noticeable extent in Western Europe, not in the rest of the world. Why? The author observes significantly: 'Even Enlightenment did not stand for the abolition of religion; it only stood for the abolition of religious bigotry, superstition and excesses of organised religion'. But what took place was not simply the rise of non-parochial spirituality, but the rise of bigotry and religious nationalism also. Religion was hardly abolished from the public sphere, but got fused with national politics. The partition of India was a result of this phenomenon, and even in the last 76 years after it, India has not been able to come out of its consequences. Several Muslim countries still swear by *Sharia* and justify excluding women from equal rights. Even some Buddhist-majority countries are not able to give up religious bigotry. Myanmar's treatment of Rohingya Muslim minority and Sri Lanka's treatment of Tamil minority go against the religion of love and compassion taught by the Buddha. It seems that modernisation has meant only technological progress for many countries, without the values of religious tolerance and humanism taught by its philosophers. In this restricted sense, stripped of ethics, modernisation has become dangerous. This is so even without considering its terrible impact on the Earth's environment. Mahatma Gandhi was severely critical of modern technology if it came without compassion and humanism. He made religious tolerance and understanding the motto of his life's mission. There is thus nothing inevitable or automatic in modernisation as an evolutionary force of development of society, economy, or polity that it will lead to the paradise of liberty, equality and fraternity—which includes religious tolerance too. These goals have to be especially sought after and pursued as a matter of state policy.

Anil Kumar points out another dimension of the dark side of modernisation. It was accompanied by imperialist exploitation of developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Andre Gunder Frank called it 'development of underdevelopment'. Underdevelopment was not simply a case of lagging behind in development, but was an active process of depriving the colonised world of its development potential through exploitation by the industrialised imperial countries. The impact was so bad and widespread that it is a taking a long struggle to come out of it and become free. The resultant poverty led to hopelessness and made people seek the solace of religion as an opium, as observed by Marx.

This makes Anil Kumar to take a critical look at the Marxian theory as an approach to understand the rise of religion and religiosity, which takes place even under conditions of economic growth and technological progress. He regards Marx as a

post-Enlightenment intellectual. Though Marx's atheism stemmed from the Enlightenment movement, he transcended atheism by arguing that mere rationalism and criticism of religion would not dissolve religion. One has to understand the circumstances or conditions that give rise to religiosity. According to Marx, the superstructure of religion is abolished only by abolishing alienating and exploitative conditions of a capitalist class society which cause poverty and deprivation. He predicted that in a post-revolutionary, casteless, communist society, there will not be any religion since there would be no need for it. However, referring to Kolakowski's view, Anil Kumar points out that Marxism itself acquired the characteristics of a religion. It was not just an optional religion but a state religion in a communist state, since the communist states banned religion not only in the public but even under the private sphere. They had no confidence that traditional religion would disappear in a classless society by itself. It showed that the followers of Marx themselves were sceptical about Marxist prediction! Anyway when the communist states broke down, the traditional religion revived again! Thus in Anil Kumar's view, the Marxian theory does not appear to be a great help in understanding the prospects of religion either under capitalism or under socialism.

This disappointment with both the modernisation theory and Marxian theory leads Anil Kumar to look at the philosophy of hermeneutics of Gadamer-Habermas debate. Both Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) and Jurgen Habermas (1929–) were leading philosophers of the 20th Century, and the debate between them about tradition including religious tradition is found to be pertinent by Anil Kumar. Hermeneutics may sound a formidable word, but it only means the art and science of interpretation. Originally applied to Biblical and legal texts, the word subsequently came to be used to cover other texts too, and further to all forms of human understanding. Evidently, the word covers interpreting and understanding tradition too.

Gadamer emphasised the necessity of tradition and language for human thought and progress. For this progress to take place, openness of dialogue between humans is very much needed. It promotes mutual understanding and contributes to the march of civilization. There is a commonality which all humans share, which is termed as *Being* by Gadamer. Hermeneutics enriches this Being and makes human existence meaningful. Tradition is a basic condition under which the process of knowledge starts, which provides the interests and questions that incite knowing. According to him, one cannot escape from one's own tradition. Thus, resurgence of tradition does not surprise Gadamer, because it is a necessary condition of humanity and human progress. But tradition is not necessarily a conservative force; for Gadamer, it is more a provocative force. A revolution is actually a response to tradition. Thus, even if influenced or stimulated by tradition, one does not endorse all traditions. We retain our critical faculty and use it to examine tradition; we do not have to blindly confirm everything in tradition. In the process, old traditions may be drastically modified, or new traditions may emerge. Hermeneutics ensures this. But in Anil Kumar's interpretation of Gadamer, 'even a break with tradition cannot be a total one. There is no complete and entirely fresh beginning either in history or for individuals'. The force

of hermeneutics is utilised more fully, when a dialogue takes place *between* traditions and cultures. It changes our mental or epistemic horizons and promotes understanding. Gadamer speaks of 'fusion of horizons' which promotes further knowledge and human progress. Openness to dialogue reduces the possibility of intercultural conflicts and enriches one's own culture. To get tied down to a fixed, static horizon or monoculture, means denying differences in horizons and refusing to understand others and promote even one's own progress.

Habermas, on the other hand, feels quite concerned about the resurgence of religion, 'a fundamentalist radicalisation, and the political instrumentalisation of the potential for violence in many of the world religions'. It appears that he is not worried so much by the resurgence of religion per se, as by the resurgence of inter-religious strife. But there seems to be no attempt to explain it. He raises, however, important questions like how to grapple with traditions, or how to negotiate with them. Anil Kumar observes that such questions become particularly important in complex societies with multiple religions and traditions like India. He mentions that there is a respected tradition of secularism and agnosticism too in India. *Lokāyata*, Buddhism and Jainism come under it. But the latter two are also religions!

Habermas finds Gadamer's emphasis on tradition problematic. He criticised Gadamer for holding tradition as inescapable because it then forecloses the possibility of emancipation from conservatism. He takes Gadamer to task for even speaking of authoritativeness of tradition, as it goes against the role of exercising one's critical judgement and reason, advocated by Enlightenment. Habermas holds that Enlightenment is still an unfinished project, and the emphasis on reason or rationality is quite pertinent now in the context of resurgence of religion.

Later, however, Habermas considers what he calls the 'post-secular' condition of humanity in the form of resurgence of religion with sympathetic understanding, if not with approval as such. Anil Kumar quotes him: 'Even today, religious traditions perform the function of articulating awareness of what is lacking or absent. They keep alive sensitivity to failure and suffering. They rescue from oblivion the dimensions of our social and personal relations in which advances in cultural and social rationalisation have caused utter devastation'. Anil Kumar says that 'Habermas is the only critical thinker who has shown exceptional openness to understanding and appreciating the importance of religion to human life. … In this mode of thinking, religion is not dismissed *tout court*. Religion is seen no longer as an ideology or opiate, as in Marx's terms. It is a meaning-giving font of wisdom; something that complements the loss of meaning in modern life. While it is not a substitute for modernity, it completes modernity with what is lacking in it; not only in private life but also public life and the public sphere'. At the same time, Habermas observes that a liberal democracy neither has nor needs any 'religious aura'. But it has to grant the right to the freedom of religious practice and be committed to religious tolerance.

I think that this standpoint of Habermas brings about a convergence between him and Gadamer. Neither of them rejects religion nor seeks its suppression in either private or public life. As observed above about Gadamer, his emphasis on tradition does not preclude critical reasoning about it, as Habermas charges. Gadamer's advocacy of dialogue and 'fusion of civilizations' is similar to 'communicative action'

recommended by Habermas. Communicative actions promote mutual understanding and reduce intercultural conflicts, as with Gadamer's dialogue. Both stressed the need to sympathetically understand differences in culture and tradition. The point of convergence between the two philosophers is very close to the Gandhian viewpoint also regarding religion. Gandhi did not dismiss religion, but at the same time insisted that it has to pass the test of rationality and compassion for others. Religious tolerance was a motto of his life, and he laid down his life for it. This is particularly important in a country like India with a plurality of religions. Gandhi advocated that the state in India should follow the policy of *Sarva dharma sama bhāva*—equal respect to all religions, rather than *Dharma nirapekshatā*—indifference of the state to all religions, as Anil Kumar points out in the book. He observes that the Indian state has followed Gandhi's advice and has adopted the former principle.

Anil Kumar, however, also observes that Gadamer's theory has serious limitations when it comes to addressing prejudices that lead to vertical social hierarchies like caste in India and class in general. Dialogues work better in mutual understanding between horizontal groups, but not necessarily between vertical hierarchies. Marx advocated revolutionary class struggles to resolve them, including resort to violence if necessary. M. K. Gandhi, however, advocated a nonviolent approach of Trusteeship on the part of the propertied classes, and state intervention in the form of taxing the rich to help the poor if voluntary Trusteeship does not work satisfactorily enough. But with liberalisation and economic reforms, class-based inequalities are uncontrollably aggravating in most of the countries including India and China. This needs following the principles of a welfare state, under which health care and education up to the 12th Grade are made compulsory, universal and free for all. There is a strong statistical evidence to show a significant positive correlation between the extent of poverty and the proportion of out-of-pocket expenditure on health in the total expenditure on health, both across countries and over time within a country. A serious illness can aggravate poverty, and push down even non-poor households below the poverty line. Epidemics which hit the poor more aggravating poverty significantly, unless tackled resolutely by the state and free medical treatment including hospitalisation is provided. As per WHO statistics, India is among countries with high out-of-pocket expenditure on health. In 2020, it was 51% in India, compared with 35% in China, 28% in South Korea and Russia, 14% in the UK, 13% in Sweden, 12% in Canada, 10% in the USA and only 5% in South Africa. Dialogue is not enough; state intervention to solve inter-class disparities is also quite necessary. The difficult task of ensuring equality of opportunities and a level playing field for all in starting their careers cannot be achieved without state intervention. A democratic state cannot afford to be a handmaid of upper classes, since numbers and voting power are in favour of the lower classes, and they cannot be easily cheated and misled for long, though populist political leaders may try to do so. That is why a genuine democracy is necessary for social justice.

Caste differences are a more problematic issue. While Marx analysed class differences with great insight, he dismissed caste in India as 'Class muck' as pointed out by Anil Kumar. Both Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and M. K. Gandhi, on the other hand, gave a lot of attention to caste discrimination and tried to address the problem. While Gandhi appealed to upper castes to see reason and be more human, Dr. Ambedkar appealed to the oppressed classes to cultivate self-esteem and to educate and organise themselves, and protest against injustice. Thus their missions complemented each other. Dr. Ambedkar was more analytical and pragmatic than Gandhi, though both had the same goal of ending casteism. Dr. Ambedkar pointed out that the chief difference between class and caste was that while the former permitted social or vertical mobility, the latter did not. One can rise above in one's class but not in caste as it is based on birth which cannot be changed. Thanks, however, to the policy of positive discrimination or reservation policy as is called popular in India, the hierarchical differences are widely breaking down, and millions from the formerly depressed classes have entered into the mainstream (Nadkarni 2020: 10–52). Dr. Ambedkar's project of 'annihilation of caste', is, however, far from over.

The role of Hinduism in this task is very much exaggerated. The real reasons for the survival of casteism have to be sought elsewhere. But first, we may look into the alleged role of Hinduism. It is not correct to term Hinduism as Brahmanism or upper caste religion. There is no such religion as Brahmanism. Hinduism is not a creation of Brahmins alone, and non-Brahmins have in fact played a more dominant role in developing it. Vedic and Upanishadic Rishis came from different backgrounds and communities including those at the most humble levels. Valmiki who composed the *Rāmāyana* was not a Brahmin. Vyāsa, the author of the *Mahābhārata*, was of a mixed origin, his mother being a fisherwoman. The greatest of the Sanskrit poets, Kavi Kālidāsa, was also not a Brahmin.

Reform movements in Hinduism in the form of Bhakti Movements started much earlier than in Christianity. Bhakti Movements denounced caste discrimination, preached equality and advocated Bhakti or Love of God and humanity as the simplest and most effective and direct path to God. Incidentally, it reduced the importance of priests (who were Brahmins) who acted as intermediaries between God and humans. The Bhakti movements started first in Tamil Nadu as early as the 2nd Century CE by Tiruvalluvar. Basavanna, a prominent leader of the Bhakti Movement in Karnataka belonged to the 12th Century BC. The Bhakti Movements during the medieval age all over India were led mainly by non-Brahmins, and their followers came from all communities including the lowest. The Bhakti Movements made Hinduism broad-based as never before. In the modern Renaissance of Hinduism also, non-Brahmins played a leading role. To mention some of them: Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Shri Aurobindo, Narayana Guru, Satya Sai Baba and Mata Amritānandamayi. The bulk of followers of Hinduism are non-Brahmins. This was so in the past and at present too. Many non-Brahmin communities now have their own *Mathas* (monasteries) and Swamijis (monks) who head them. Narayana Guru and Mata Amritānandamayi threw open the priesthood

in Hinduism to non-Brahmins and women too, ending the monopoly of Brahmins and males. The process of sanskritisation, to which Anil Kumar refers, also worked towards bridging the differences between non-Brahmins and Brahmins.

Untouchability is not a part of Hinduism as a religion. It can be eradicated without having to eradicate Hinduism. As Dr. Ambedkar himself has pointed out, most of the Vedic period did not have the caste system, which emerged only at the end of it. According to him, untouchability also emerged long after the post-Buddhist period. There was thus a phase in the history of Hinduism when there was neither caste system nor untouchability, and we cannot rule out a similar phase in future. I have presented detailed scriptural evidence elsewhere showing opposition to hierarchical caste system based on birth and to untouchability (Nadkarni 2003; Nadkarni 2013).

However, there seems to have taken place a resurgence of casteism in India, with religiosity riding on it in the political sphere. The ritual significance of caste has almost disappeared, but its resurgence is mainly in the political sphere. Since most of the castes especially in Karnataka have their *Mathas* and religious heads, caste politics is often played out through these religious heads. Political leaders visiting *Mathas* and seeking blessings of the *Matha* heads, especially when the elections are close, have become frequent. The nexus between religion and politics is taking place mainly through caste forces. Ironically, it is neither the Dalit castes nor the traditional upper castes, which are prominent in this nexus, but the powerful 'dominant castes' as defined by the eminent sociologist M. N. Srinivas, those which dominate in numbers and also in land ownership, thus dominating politics too.

Why hasn't the outdated caste system been wiped out by the forces of modernisation, in spite of all the reformers' efforts, sanskritisation, urbanisation and industrialisation in India? There are several reasons for this. Firstly, during the British rule, a large number of artisans lost their livelihoods because of the imports of cheap British goods and suffered a serious decline in their social status. Secondly, the caste censuses initiated by the British sharpened the sensitivity to caste differences as never before. Thirdly, Land reforms undertaken after Independence, which should have transferred land to the real tillers of the soil, who were mostly untouchables, benefited mainly the intermediate tenants who belonged to the middle castes including the 'OBCs' (the other backward classes). Fourthly, the growth of non-agricultural sectors was not fast enough to absorb excess population in rural areas or agriculture. Fifth, the task of making education up to at least 18 years of age universal, compulsory and free, was not seriously pursued. Last but not least, the reservation policy consolidated caste consciousness and created a stake in being called backward, though the policy was quite necessary to open up blocked opportunities in education and jobs to the oppressed classes. What was missing in the policy was a clause to deny the benefit of reservation to the creamy layer within the oppressed castes, who had already overcome their caste disadvantages because of high success in their careers or business. Such a clause would have diluted caste consciousness and division in society. This is a serious matter because the extent of reservation is up to 50 per cent in most of the states, and almost 75 per cent in Tamil Nadu. There is a clamour by more and more castes for the reservation benefits extended to them, by raising the ceiling above 50 per cent. This would seriously constrain the scope for talents and merit. No other

country in the world has such a high level of reservation. The 'dominant castes' have found sections of them economically and socially backward and want the reservation benefits extended to them also. There is even a call to enable each caste to have a share of economic and political benefits which is equal to their share in total population, requiring a detailed caste census. Since there are many (including some hierarchical) sub-castes within each caste, it would require a census which would count the population in each of the thousands of sub-castes. To make matters even worse, other religions in India, including particularly Islam, Christianity and Sikhism, also have castes within them. Conversion from Hinduism has not helped in erasing the caste status. There is a policy issue of extending reservation to the scheduled castes within them. Since a caste-wise reservation to women (and the third gender too?) would also be required, it would lead to a most complicated reservation scheme. This will keep busy most of the politicians fighting with each other for respective caste rights.

What is ignored in this clamour to give primacy to population size of each caste, is that it means acceptance of unashamed majoritarianism in India. The principle may be extended to religious identities also, justifying Hindu majoritarianism in Hindu-majority countries, Muslim-majoritarianism in Muslim-majority countries and so on. It can mean second-class citizenship for minorities. A further implication of this principle is that since the growth of population in the northern states of India is much faster than in the southern, it would require an increasing representation in the Parliament to Northern states. The states which followed the national directive for population control, aided by higher per capita income growth, and have been contributing more to GNP of the country and national tax revenues, are precisely the states which will be punished by this principle. The same situation applies to castes as well. Every group will have a stake in increasing their population. It would divert the attention of political leaders from really more important national issues like poverty, hunger, unemployment and economic development. We should not forget that reservation only distributes given opportunities, but it is more important to increase the number and quality of total opportunities available, whether they are for jobs or for education. An excessive obsession with caste-based reservation ignores this significant point.

Anil Kumar's book is not mere philosophy. It has an important implication for concrete policy. He brings it out succinctly thus: 'Domination of the religious over the secular leads to theocracy, and the domination of one religion over others leads to fascism. … Because neither theocracy nor fascism is welcome choices for multi-religious societies, the only way out from the all too frequent religious strife would be either privatisation of religion or domination of the secular over the religious … in the public sphere'. I hope that this central message of the book is accepted by all. I wish the book great success which it really deserves.

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