

DANAM CONFERENCE 2004

SESSION 3

Theme: 'Nationalisms' and 'Hinduisms'

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SUMMARY AND ABSTRACTS

Summary of Session 3

Anyone who follows the news of India is aware that there is an on-going discussion regarding the relationship between the nation and the variety of religious beliefs and practices of its citizens. Although the Indian constitution describes India as a 'secular state,' this is indeed a multivalent designation. The five papers proposed for this session portray diverse conceptualizations of the nation and its relationship to varied interpretations of Hinduism during the Indian independence movement. Hence, we must speak of a variety of 'nationalisms' and 'Hinduisms.'

'A Patriot of the Old School: Baba Premananda Bharati and Indian Nationalism,' begins by describing Baba Premananda Bharati's (1868-1914) return to India following five years of Hindu missionary activity in the United States, especially in New York, Boston, and Los Angeles. En route, he had identified the reason for his return as a call to play a role in the Indian movement for independence. However, his ideas brought forth criticism both from the Anglo-Indian and the Bengali nationalist press. He challenged the secular model of political independence for India but argued for the development of Hindu religious culture as the way to true emancipation. Despite the fact that the opposition of the Bengali nationalist press limited his influence in Bengal, he continued to preach what he considered his 'moderate' path throughout his life. This tension between secular nationhood and Hindu religious culture continues in contemporary Indian political life.

A significantly different concept of both nationalism and Hinduism is presented in 'Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy, Progressive Hindu Nationalist.' Dr. Reddy, a well-known Hindu feminist, legislator, and social reformer expressed her belief in the compatibility of a modern secular nation with universal suffrage and the Hindu tradition. A follower of Mahatma Gandhi, Reddy often found rhetorical inspiration in Hindu heroines and feminine deities. At the same time, she strongly supported religious reforms for the amelioration of the social and economic status of women and the underclass. Reddy was opposed to a communalism in principle, whether in reference to quotas for the representation of women in government, or of specific religions. She believed in the equal rights to all citizens, regardless of gender, class, or religion.

'Ram Darshan: Picturing a Nationalism for the Twenty-first Century,' bridges the time between the nationalisms of the independence movement, and contemporary Hindu nationalist movements. This paper focuses on an historical analysis of some of the major religio-political forces behind the interpretation of the "Ram Darshan," a presentation of a very distinctive Ramkatha in modern Chitrakut. The Ram Darshan is not described in its brochures as a temple, but rather as a site within the sacred area of Chitrakut to give the pilgrim/tourist 'a glimpse of Lord Shri Ram' and 'insight into his exemplary life and character.' This venue, with its state-of-the-art animatronic figures, statues, and dioramas, is a concrete result of the rise, during and after the Independence Movement, of particular ideas about and application of a paradigm of ideal government, Ramraj. This paper will trace a specific historical interpretation of Ramraj and the Ramkatha, demonstrating finally how the founders of the Ram Darshan attraction chose especially to elaborate on the role of Ram as the defender of helpless women against the violent and demonic.

Abstracts of Session 3

Kay K. Jordan, Ph.D., Radford University
The Hinduism of Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy

Dr. S. Muthulakshmi Reddy, the first woman to serve in an Indian legislature, was an ardent spokesperson for women's uplift and suffrage as well as Indian independence. She was active in both the Women's Indian Association and the All India Women's Conference. Dr. Reddy was a member of the Hartog Committee and was also selected to speak in support of woman's suffrage before the Linlithgow Committee in London in 1933. A follower of Mahatma Gandhi, she often referred to Hindu heroines and goddesses in her speeches while simultaneously supporting religious reforms including the elimination of devadasi dedication, child marriage, and untouchability. Reddy's construction of Hinduism combined elements of Brahmanical Hinduism and rationalism. She believed that there were truths common to the major world religions including rationally based moral teachings. She affirmed those elements of Hinduism that she viewed as supportive of women and humanity, in general, and discarded those elements that she regarded as obsolete, superstitious, or irrational. Reddy opposed communalism and supported a democratic India granting equal rights to all citizens regardless of sex or religion.

Gerald T. Carney, Ph. D., Hampden Sydney College
A Patriot of the Old School: Baba Premananda Bharati and Indian Nationalism

In 1907, Baba Premananda Bharati (1868–1914) returned to India following five years of Hindu missionary activity in the United States, especially in New York, Boston, and Los Angeles. En route, he had identified the reason for his return as a call to play a role in the Indian movement for independence. However, his November 1907 address on Indian nationalism in Madras brought resounding criticism from both the Anglo-Indian and the Bengali nationalist press. Baba Bharati argued against a secular model of political independence for India but for cultivation of Hindu religious culture as the pathway to true freedom. Although the critical response to this lecture severely limited his influence among the "extremists" of his native Bengal, Baba Bharati continued to preach this "moderate" approach to Indian cultural and religious nationalism for the remainder of his life. This tension between secular nationhood and Hindu religious culture continues to resonate in contemporary Indian political discourse

Phyllis Herman, Ph. D., California State University, Northridge
Ram Darshan: Picturing a Nationalism for the Twenty-first Century

This paper focuses on an historical analysis of some of the major religio-political forces behind the construction of the "Ram Darshan," a presentation of a very distinctive Ramkatha in modern Chitrakut. The Ram Darshan is not described in its brochures as a temple, but rather as a site within the sacred area of Chitrakut to give the pilgrim/tourist 'a glimpse of Lord Shri Ram' and 'insight into his exemplary life and character.' This venue, with its state-of-the-art animatronic figures, statues, and dioramas, is a concrete result of the rise, during and after the Independence Movement, of particular Hindu nationalist groups' ideas about and manipulation of a paradigm of ideal government, Ramraj. This paper will trace a specific historical interpretation of Ramraj and the Ramkatha, demonstrating finally how and why the backers of the Ram Darshan attraction chose especially to elaborate on the role of Ram as the defender of helpless women against the violent and demonic Other.

Diana Dimitrova, Ph. D., Michigan State University
Religion, Nationalism and Film

In this paper, I will explore the intersections of religion, nationalism and film. I will discuss the representation of the movement for national independence in Rajkumar Santoshi's *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, Sukumar Nair's *Shaheed-e-Azam* and Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi*. The films deal with the life, ideas and work of two figures in the Independence movement, Gandhi and Bhagat Singh. They are two personalities who chose different ways to fight for India's freedom. All three films play an important role in promoting and affirming a sense of national pride and identity. Although the narratives are set in the years of pre-Independence India, the films convey a clearly discernible modern message. These films are contemporary documents, in which the filmmakers revisit and reinterpret the issues of religion and nationalism. How do they relate to current issues of religious pluralism and religious nationalism?