Introduction

Dissent, Religion and Civil Society

> The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.
>
> *Karl Marx*

> If I knew someone is coming over with the expressed intention of doing good, I would flee.
>
> *Henry David Thoreau*

Transforming the self and the world: a reticent dialogue

The book is about the intricate relation between religion, civil society and movements. It revolves around sociology of both civil society and religious movements by opening up a conversation between the two strands. The attempt is also to bring sociological insights from a study of religious movements to reflect on the question of religion in the secular–democratic space. It has been a while since the rise or so-called resurgence of religion has shaken the very ground of secularization theories. Diverse religious movements are a ubiquitous feature of our times. But social movement theories suffer from a serious lag so far as accounting for religious movements is concerned. Framing the question of religious movement in the context of secular-democracy, the book explores two different religious movements in contemporary India. Religious movements have been a blind-spot of movement studies and I argue that this omission is not accidental but epistemological, based on a sense of disquiet in recognizing that religious movements share a space in civil society. The framework of collective identity or the new social movement paradigm questioned the instrumental rationality of resource mobilization as well as class conflict and brought to the fore the question of identity in movements. But the ever-lengthening list of social categories ranging from

race, ethnicity, gender, 'animal rights activists' and many more, excluded religion and religious movements. Religion came into the discourse of social change as an after-thought at a 'post-secular' moment. Though it was not an unknown wisdom that the idea that the world *can* be transformed lies at the heart of modernity as well as religion. Both post-Enlightenment modernity and Axial Age religion strive to make the world a 'better place.' I will elaborate the elective affinity between the two, following S. N. Eisenstadt but before that a few words about the reticent dialogue between religion and movement studies in sociology.

In contemporary times, the challenge posed by ever-emergent religious movements and their diverse trajectories could not be addressed with the set of existing theories of civil society that informs the academic discourse. A survey of sociological literature shows how the relation between religion and social movements has been marked by theoretical reticence if not confusion. There are, of course, case studies that capture the role of religion in different movements ranging from labour struggles in the United States, the liberation movement in El Salvador and in the context of apartheid in South Africa. There are also many other cases in contexts as varied as Algeria, Iran and Europe (Nepstad and Williams 2007). But these case studies do not inform the sociological theories of social movement. Scanning several state-of-the-art collections on social movements published since 1982, Fred Kniss and Gene Burns have shown that important debates in religion and social movements have remained as parallel discourses rather than enriching dialogue (2004). The present study aims to cross these overdrawn boundaries as it traverses the rather uncharted territory between religion, civil society and movements.

I argue that the dialogue has remained tentative due to the fact that though the dominance of the secularization paradigm has receded, its concomitant assumptions have not. Religion was supposed to disappear as the process of modernization unfolded gradually but steadily. While mainstream sociology saw no important research question in religion, sociology of religion also withdrew from the central debates in sociology. This has resulted in an absence of engagement with the assumptions that accompany the core debates in sociology of religion; most importantly, the assumption that modernization necessarily implies secularization, as Grace Davie has succinctly argued. The events around the world has reminded us time and again that our conceptual tools and methods are grossly inadequate in the context of a 'furiously religious' modern world. Davie has argued for an urgent need in sociology of religion to develop tools and a conceptual framework by working closely with the parent discipline (2007: 4).

The present work attempts this task by engaging in an ethnographic reading of two different reform movements in contemporary India. Bringing them within an analytical frame involves an 'intertextual' reading of the movements. It initiates a dialogue between the narratives and a much needed conversation in sociology between different religious experiences/processes.[1] The theme of internal 'sectarian' critique runs through religious traditions. This helps us in moving away from a reified notion of movements to one that accounts for their emergent and constituted nature. The study locates the movements not in their stated goals and rhetoric but at discrepant locations: from the village temples and mosques to the locales where they intersect with the state machineries. It also makes a case for appraising the religious movements as *movements* and not on delineating the 'essential nature' of Hinduism or Islam. The argument is that religious movements need to negotiate the questions that all social movements grapple with over a period of time. This approach requires that many well-accepted concepts in movement studies on one hand and sociology of religion on the other, need to be unpacked and rethought. It is worth taking note that in the social movements literature in India, religious movements are very often either not dealt with (Shah 2004) or categorized as backward class movements (Rao 1979a).[2]

My engagement with two different religious movements in India has convinced me that the intellectual problematic needs to be rescued not only from Western Church-centric conceptualizations but, equally importantly, from conceptual binaries in Indian sociology that has dominated the scholarship on Hindu and Islamic movements.[3] The original binary between the Great and Little traditions has resurfaced in different avatars pushing the academic agenda away from movement studies. In order to foreground the movement aspect of religion, I resurrect the concept of sectarianism, drawing on the work by Eisenstadt who, in turn, anchors his arguments on Karl Jaspers' concept of the Axil Age. As I introduce the movements in this chapter, I also discuss the complexities of fieldwork on movements, especially religious movements. Methodologically, we steer away from movement studies that focus on the rhetoric and the ideology/actions of the founders and develop a field-view of movements, focusing on the everyday practice and perspectives of the devotees and volunteers.

The myriad, splintering movements that are a ubiquitous phenomenon in religion are difficult to frame conceptually, especially from a comparative perspective.[4] I argue that dissent movements within religion have been badly served by an under-theorized concept of sects.[5] Be it a protest either against the Church's accommodation to the worldly standards, or a protest against the world itself, sects emerge against traditional authority and/or orthodoxy.[6]

They derive authority from charismatic leadership. It is the 'call' and not the 'office' that matters. However, this charismatic innovation need not necessarily rise at the margins of society, as Max Weber had assumed, as an anti-institutional force.[7] Berger illustrated how sectarianism took place within the social structure of the Church. A phenomenon he described in his study of a Protestant Church in an industrial town in Germany as 'intra-church sectarianism' (1954: 43). A focus on the life-cycle of movements/sects as they aim to change the self and the world shows how over a period of time these movements develop and change as they interact with the mainstream society and the state. These negotiations shape their ideological as well as organizational orientation. It is this heterodox spirit of sectarianism that Eisenstadt had identified as the precursor to different modern social and political movements, including that of modern fundamentalist movements (1999).

The view that society is malleable and could be changed according to an ideal: the basis of the Enlightenment and Great Revolutions since the eighteenth century, Eisenstadt has argued, is based on the religious vision of what came to be known as the Axial Age.[8] In other words, the impetus for social 'reconstruction' in the modern era originated in the religious vision of the conflict between the transcendental and mundane orders.[9] It also led to the formation of new social actors: a new elite who developed novel 'transcendental' conceptions, which over a period of time became institutionalized. The transformed intellectual elite (unlike the pre-Axial Age's sacred specialists) became relatively autonomous partners in the ruling coalition *as well as* in protest movements. Thus, a re-ordering of the relation between the political and the higher transcendental order took place. The ruler was no longer the King-God, the embodiment of the cosmic and the earthly order but someone who was accountable to some higher order and Divine Law (1982: 298–308). According to Eisenstadt, this new religiosity offered a multiplicity of vision and subsequently generated challenges to itself that led to contestation and dissent. In other words, dissent was an outcome of these alternative visions and they developed into sects: schismatic groups that offered their own innovations in different social arenas and the institutional framework of the civilization (1999: 14). Since they fundamentally believed in the inherent perfectibility of the world order, these movements interpreted the world not only as a contradiction between the ideal and the real but also in terms of the possible. They not only claimed to understand the world in its complexity but also aimed to *change* it. Therefore, all projects of social transformation – secular as well as religious – are informed by ethical ideals as well as soteriological expectations. According to Eisenstadt, they are

influenced by the ontological visions of the sectarian proto-fundamentalist movements of the late medieval and early modern era (Ibid.: 40). Though the idea of an 'all-embracing', universalistic Axial Age period has been questioned, the proposed link between sectarianism and visions of social change provokes a fresh perspective for understanding both religious and secular movements.[10]

An ideal vision and the sectarian protest

An early theoretical intervention in the study of sects that identified its inherent protest character had come from Ernst Troeltsch. A theologian by training, Troeltsch, in his seminal work on the subject, showed the significance of the crucial distinction between the Church and the sect in the history of Christianity. According to Troeltsch, while the Church represents the majority reaction, accommodation and compromise with the secular society, sects refer to a voluntary society of strict believers who live apart from the world in some way. The 'Church-type' represents the longing for a universal all-embracing ideal, the desire to dominate the world and the civilization in general. It considers the state as an institution ordained and permitted by God. In contrast, the sect is seen as a protest group, protesting both the Church's accommodation to the world, as well as the world itself, having members mainly among the lower classes (1956 [1912]: 331, 346).[11] The sectarian tendency in Christianity could be traced back to its origin as a separatist movement in Judaism. The negative connotation that the term is associated with, it is said, comes from the perspective of the established Church.

The fact that sectarian movements have very often brought about revolutionary changes not only within religion but in society, economy and polity had not gone unnoticed by sociologists. Scholars as diverse in theoretical orientation as Alexis de Tocqueville, Weber and Friedrich Engels had unearthed the role that these sectarian groups played in the context of socio-political as well as economic innovations. Engels' account of the Peasant War in Germany illustrated that the Reformation was not only the beginning of modernity in theology but that it also provided a revolutionary opposition to feudalism (1956 [1870]).[12] Weber's classic study of the rise of modern capitalist values as an *unintended consequence* of two inter-related and unique Protestant dogmas – that of 'calling' and 'pre-destination' – is also a case in sect development (1992 [1930]).

While Weber found a connection between the sectarian Puritan ethics and modern capitalism, writing a century before him, Tocqueville had found, in the inception of American democracy, a relation between religious innovation

and political liberty. Democracy, if Tocqueville is to be believed, was to a large extent a product of the Puritans' search for an ideal locale to practice their religion in peace. The piety of the Puritans was not merely a speculative affair that took no cognizance of the course of worldly events. On the contrary, it was as much a political theory as it was a religious doctrine. Unable to practice with rigour the principles they held supreme and persecuted by the government of the mother country for professing such values, the Puritans set out to find some place where they could live according to their own opinion and worship God in freedom.[13] Thus, in the name of God, religion and the state were separated and the 'civil body politick' was formed (1994 [1835]: 36). Jose Casanova has also observed that it was Tocqueville's classic analytical sociological account of American religious pluralism that captured its affinities with the model of a pluralist and democratic civil society (2013: 39).

Later, it was in the writings of the British Marxist historians that the contributions of religious sects found an academic space in the study of movements. E. P. Thompson's magnum opus on the formation of the English working class aimed to unravel the mystery of how Methodism could perform a dual role, as the religion of both the exploiters and the exploited. Thompson writes that while the Methodist doctrines of the 'blessedness of poverty' catered to the need of the industry owners to find good workers, it also became a religion of the exploited through (a) indoctrination, (b) community sense and (c) the psychic consequences of counter-revolution during which many working people turned to religion as a consolation (1966 [1963]: 375–380).[14] Religion, though crucial in this context, remained an 'epiphenomen', rooted in the 'psychic' needs of the people. In this account, the 'transforming power of the Cross' has been attributed to the psychic qualities of the human mind and the question, 'what transforms the Cross?', has remained a non-question.

It was also in the acts of the religious dissenters that J. P. S. Uberoi traced the rise of civil society, delinking it from the trajectory of the modern nation-state in Europe. He argued that it was the religious dissenters – the Non-Conformists and new-Christians – who pioneered the struggle for pluralism of conscience in civil society, a precondition for all civil and political freedom. Opposed to the union of the Church and the state, they severed connection with the established Church of England when it accepted royal supremacy at the time of the Reformation, and died as martyrs by royal decree for doing so (2003: 120). For Uberoi, in India, a *religious* critique of both secular and religious power could be found in the exemplary reformers from Kabir to Mahatma Gandhi who led reform movements in civil society (1996). The argument is that sects embody the element of protest within religion. They

criticize both the Church's accommodation to the world or its orthodoxy and at times, the world itself.

The question that arises is that if the study of sects has been germane to classical sociology, why did it not generate further research? One of the reasons could be that the study of sectarian movements had remained cloistered within the sub-discipline of sociology of religion, not in dialogue with the theories of mainstream sociology and social movements. In the Indian context, the study of religious movements and the groups they establish, namely, sects has been the academic prerogative of Indologists, historians and religious studies scholars whereas sociologists have primarily focused on caste and its concomitant social practices.[15] Although sociologists have often expressed the need to develop a comparative historical approach to the study of sociology of religion so that it does not remain fettered by Western ethnocentricism, it has rarely happened in practice. It is said that Weber himself relinquished much of his interest in Church/sect dichotomy as he 'moved Eastward' (Robertson 1977: 198). If the relation between religion, social movements and sect formation has been a neglected field in sociology, it has remained even more truncated in the context of non-Christian religions.[16] Sociologists have often analyzed sects in Hinduism as bereft of any element of protest. For example, Bryan R. Wilson has argued that unlike Hinduism, where the religious ethic provided legitimization of a social status system, Christianity, initially the religion of the 'outsider' groups, had an ideological history of rebellion (1966: 40).

Review of literature in the Indian context reveals that the study of religious movements very often contain rich historical material on particular religious traditions but rarely deal with the questions relevant to sociology of religion/movement beyond a cursory discussion on the (in)applicability of the Church/sect distinction in the Indian context.[17] Sectarian movements remained a truncated discourse even when sociologists recognized their importance. For example, Mark Juergensmeyer's study of movements against Untouchability among the followers of Ravidas, Ad Dharm, Arya Samaj, and the Valmiki Sabha, in twentieth century Punjab, gives a historical account of sectarian experiments with socio-political protest in civil society, but he does not address the question of sect formation in this context.[18] He settles for a functionalist explanation describing these movements as 'pressure valves', 'forms of social and religious expression which exist as islands in Hindu society but not ultimately disturbing it' (1982: 1–10, 87). It was also argued that in contrast to Europe and China, in India, the numerous heterodox sectarian movements including Jainism and Buddhism did not seek the 'principled

reconstruction' or alternative conceptions of the political or economic arena (Eisenstadt and Hartman 1994: 144–145). Even when the 'dissent, protest and reform' aspect of religious movements was discussed in the academia,[19] it did not generate any sustained theoretical interventions on the issue of sectarian protest in sociology or in movement theories.

The theoretical concerns of contemporary religious movements in sociology show an interesting range of issues but again they are not in dialogue with theories of social movement. In Lawrence A. Babb's work on three contemporary religious sects, the main concern has been the Hindu tradition's ability to generate multiple interpretations within a common frame of reference. It is not the 'modernity' of these movements but their 'protean' character that the author has drawn attention to (2000 [1986]: 1). On the other hand, Maya Warrier in her study of the Mata Amritanandamayi Mission captures the 'constructed' nature of Hindu selves in the lives of a globalizing middle class. It presents the guru-centred sects as an expression of the process of secularization where personal freedom and choice are exercised by individuals in their religious affiliation and negotiations (2003, 2005: 15–20).[20]

Cordoned off from the field of movement studies, sectarian movements in sociology of India are primarily theorized within the framework of Sanskritization and Islamization, two well-accepted concepts which, I argue, have led to more theoretical opacity than clarity. What do we really contribute to sociology of religion when we discover that Islam Islamizes? Or that, Sanskritic metaphysics is popularized by Hindu religious movements? I would dwell a little longer in this theoretical maze by going back to the original binaries between the Great and Little traditions that inform this debate. This dichotomy between Great and Little traditions and the concomitant concepts such as Sanskritization and Islamization, have led to a persistent dualism between the 'centre' and the 'periphery' in understanding religious movements. I argue that the study of religious movements needs to outgrow this binary approach and locate far more complex negotiations than accepted by these dichotomies. If movements such as Svadhyaya and the Tablighi Jamaat defy the Sanskritization/Islamization paradigms, they also resist being located in the subaltern theories framework. As we cast our analytical gaze beyond the centre/periphery binary, the ethnography of religious movements tells a different story about their spread, sustenance, agency and finally their multiple trajectories depending on the wider as well as local contexts.

Locating religious movements: beyond the discourse of centre and periphery

The study of religious movements in the Indian context has followed a paradoxical interpretative topos. The movements have been regarded both as agents of the 'Great Tradition' as well as an assertion against orthodoxy, empowering the voice of the 'Little Tradition', through the idiom of religion. They have been interpreted as an eclectic appropriation of religion by those at the lowest rung of the hierarchy, either to improve their social status or as a 'counterculture' (Madan 1991: 335–337). This has also been described as a 'subaltern' assertion by those at the margins of power (Dube 1998, Hardiman 1987).[21] This conceptual paradox has been characteristic of much of the analysis of religious movements within Hinduism, especially the bhakti movements. Krishna Sharma has succinctly captured this in the writings of the historians on the bhakti movements. She argues that on the one hand, they have been explained as a corollary of the feudal order[22] and on the other, they have been viewed as a revolt of the lower classes/castes (1987: 39–73).[23] I argue that these two approaches routinely used in the study of religious movements in India have been unhelpful in analyzing the trajectory of religious movements.

I begin with the concept of Sanskritization. The concept is grounded in the binary between the Great and Little traditions that gained currency from the work of Robert Redfield. It depicted the contrast between the textual, civilizational perspective and the everyday beliefs of the folk society (1947, 1960). The concept of Sanskritization has been perceived as mediating between the two traditions. It emerged in M. N. Srinivas's study of religion and society among the Coorgs in 1952 but it did not have as much shelf-life in the study of religion as it did in political sociology and the issue of social mobility/identity. The neologism originally described a process of social mobility within the caste system where the lower castes or groups adopted the rituals, customs and rites of the higher/dominant castes. It signified adherence to ritually pure practices such as vegetarianism, teetotalism and emulation of social practices of the higher castes such as prohibition on widow remarriage (2003 [1952], 1956). Moreover, it was seen as the way of life of 'intellectual' and 'ordinary' Hindus (2003 [1952]: 214).[24] Sanskritization has also been regarded as a two-way process since elements of the local culture are also absorbed into Sanskritic Hinduism (Singer 1972: 261).

I argue that the compartmentalization of Hindu traditions into the Sanskritic tradition, representing the 'Great tradition' versus non-Sanskritic or 'Little tradition' cannot explain the phenomenon of ever-splintering sects

within Hinduism. It completely misses out on the principle of contradiction that exists between the two aspects of Hinduism: a 'discipline-of-salvation' as well as a 'religion-of-adaptation' (Dumont 1999 [1970]). Since it does not recognize the contradiction between Brahmanism and its renunciation, on which the principle of sectarianism is based, the concept of Sanskritization cannot explain the logic of the ever emergent religious movements.[25] In other words, it does not recognize the dialectics between the principles of sacrament and salvation; tradition and charisma within Hinduism. What goes unnoticed in the sociological investigations is that the 'ordinary' *puruṣārtha* of dharma, *artha* and *kāma* and the 'extraordinary' *puruṣārtha* of moksha are necessarily opposed (Larson 1972: 149).[26]

There are methodological problems with the concept of Sanskritization as well. Lucy Carroll has pointed out that the danger of such culture-specific heuristic concepts lies in impeding cross-cultural comparison (1977: 360). The problem of how religious protest movements mediate between the classical and the vernacular traditions has been a topic relevant to English Reformation as much as they are to the bhakti movements of India. Timothy Rosendale's study of English Reformation shows how the papal monopoly was challenged through transition from Latin to English. The role of the vernacular *Book of Common Prayer* is not to be seen only as a political or evangelical text but also in the light of its role in the reciprocal constitution of nation and subject in early modern England (2001). Moreover, the concept of Sanskritization has been accused of oversimplification, and historians have complained of negation of historicity and missing out on the dimensions of power relations (Hardiman 1987).[27]

While the concept of Sanskritization has been employed in the context of Hinduism, Islamization is the paradigm within which the Islamic religious movements have been routinely analyzed. Islamization primarily refers to two things: the process of diffusion of Islam in different parts of the world as well as bringing different facets of life in accordance with the teachings of Islam as contained in the Quran and exemplified in the hadith of the Prophet. The concept has been shaped more by political discourse than academic enquiry and has often meant different things in different contexts. In the Indian context, the concept of Islamization has developed in opposition to assimilation and syncretism. The outcome of Islamization teleologically proceeds towards heightened communal consciousness and eventually to conflict. Just as the medieval 'shared spaces' or 'working arrangements' and 'fuzzy' identity found its way to contrasting identity formation during the colonial times (Saberwal 2006: 15–19). Just as the theory of Sanskritization