Faith and Social Movements

How do we understand the multitude of faith movements in our post-secular world? *Faith and Social Movements* explores this question by analyzing the theology and practice as well as the transformation of two discrepant religious movements in contemporary India. Drawing on the sociological tradition that perceives dissent, protest and charismatic critique to be integral to the institution of religion, the book begins by questioning the relevance of the reigning paradigms of Sanskritization and Islamization in the study of religious movements. The book is divided into two parts. The first part dwells on Svadhyaya, a Hindu reform movement and the second part on the Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic reform movement. The multi-sited ethnography in western India deftly traces the emergence, soteriology, new rituals, network and leadership in the movements. As the sociological gaze remains firmly focused on the village and the volunteers, the book argues for a contextual discourse on faith movements. In doing so, it challenges the perspective where diverse faith movements remain either under-theorized or lumped together as 'communal forces' or 'Wah'habi Islam'. It shows how projects of faith and self-reform have multiple trajectories and outcomes: intended as well as unintended. The insights open up a conversation between sociology of religion and social movements. Focusing on the internal dynamics of the movements and the 'unintended consequences' of piety, the author argues that it is only by raising new questions vis-à-vis religion, secularity and civil society that their entanglement can be unraveled. The book aims to raise some of these questions.

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Preface

The car crash took place after we dropped off Maheshbhai and his family at Harshupur around three in the morning. We were in the outskirts of Surat city. For a moment, I thought that a truck or a bus had hit our car. But we were rolling down a ditch as Sunilbhai who was at the wheel for many long hours had dozed off. It felt like being tossed inside a can. Finally, the roller-coaster journey came to a halt and we lay in a state of stupor. I heard Sunilbhai and his wife moaning in pain. We called out and assured one another that we were alive. I cannot remember how long we lay there till farmers in a tractor ferrying vegetables to the city spotted us and pulled us out of the mangled car. They took us to a nearby medical centre and woke up a man, probably the compounder. He attended to our wounds and administered injections. I remember being worried about the authenticity of the 'disposable' syringes and the lack of cleanliness of the place. Maheshbhai was contacted and he rushed from his village in his neighbour's car. When he saw our blood-stained faces, he hugged us and wept like a child. All of us had been travelling together for two days to attend a large-scale Svadhyaya programme on the banks of the Narmada River. For us, the journey ended with a jolt.

More help was mobilized and we were taken back to Surat city. When I woke up the next morning, my body ached as though it had been put through a wringer. The physical trauma was matched by emotional turmoil. The 'subjects' of my investigation were now busy nursing me, as I lay immobilized in pain. The accident had changed the balance between the observer and the observed. Soon I realized that the traumatic event had established a new bond. When I went back to the villages, I was introduced not only as a researcher from Delhi but someone who survived a car crash while travelling with the members of the group. Though I did not share their religious beliefs, I did share their misfortune! It evoked empathy: a vital precondition for acceptance. I was seen as someone who was not a member of the group but one willing

to share the same trials and tribulations. But many wondered, why? Why was I following a religious movement braving such hardship, in the midst of completely unknown places and people? They knew that I was travelling the length and breath of Gujarat and the lanes and by-lanes of Mumbai and Delhi. What was the nature of the project that made an otherwise respectable woman 'loiter'? Anybody could guess that I had queries but it was difficult to fathom what they were. To them, my explanations seemed implausible. They simply did not add up. It was fine to have intellectual queries but hardly anyone was convinced that it was reason enough for a woman to travel alone leaving her own family in a far away city. 'What kind of a man is your husband? And what about your in-laws?' I was asked in the villages.

I had come across Svadhyaya during my involvement with voluntary organizations – referred to as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and/or people's movements – in the late 1990s. As I grappled with the practical aspects of voluntarism and collective-action, it was of great interest for me to see how people worked spontaneously and voluntarily for Svadhyaya. The difficulty of invoking voluntary participation in community activities was discussed among the practitioners of the NGO movement. The spirit of voluntarism in religious movements such as Svadhyaya seemed exemplary in this context. I was also intrigued by the question and taking a closer look at the movement, I found that its founder Pandurang Shastri Athavale, or Dadaji, as he is addressed by his followers, did something simple, yet unique. He told his disciples that one's own salvation was possible only when one was taking care of the salvation of others in society. Therefore, one needed to go to the disadvantaged in society, not to save them, but to save oneself. And this was not the prerogative of the celibate ascetics but of ordinary householders who are otherwise busy with the mundane chores of everyday life. Svadhyaya foregrounded the question of the agent of change clearly and unequivocally in the discourse of social change and movements. It also obliquely questioned the quintessential non-reciprocity and hierarchy that undergird the very idea of 'development.' The Svadhyayis tell the people that they have not come to save or deliver them from anything; on the contrary, they have come to save themselves.

In the field, I got acquainted with the Tablighi Jamaat. I was struck by the similarity of their appeal for self-reform to their co-religionists. I decided to follow the movement in the village context. As my fieldwork progressed – following Svadhyaya through participant observation and the Tablighi Jamaat through interviews with local leaders and volunteers – the field shattered in 2002 with the Godhra carnage. It was almost the end of my fieldwork and I

came home for what was supposed to be a brief break before the final wrapping up. The break became much longer as I conceived and could not go back to the field. But when I did, sixteen months later, it was not the same field. The carnage had shattered the social fabric and the sense of basic trust that we have on one another as members of a civil society. In this context, I found the Tablighi Jamaat in a completely different role. In the midst of mayhem, it was one of the very few networks which could offer help and refuge to the victims. Despite their 'apolitical' self-description, these were political acts.

But how did one explain these in terms of sociological analysis? The oft-cited theories of Sanskritization and Islamization – the dated but reigning paradigms – could no longer make sense of such complex movements. As its practitioners were preoccupied with studying the processes of secularization and the debates around the notion of secularism, sociology seemed quite ill-equipped to take up the challenge of understanding the role of religion in the modern, 'disenchanted' world. Moreover, the study of religious movements and sects remained cloistered within the sub-discipline of sociology of religion, rarely in dialogue with the theories of social movements and collective action. Though the events since 9/11 have made religion once again a relevant topic, the discipline faces a serious 'theoretical lag' in its attempts to account for the so-called resurgence of religion. Sociologists engaged in research have pointed out the need for a rethink of its conceptual and methodological tools.

This book approaches religion through an ethnographic method. It focuses on the beliefs, rituals, mobilization and internal dynamics of the movements as well as the intended and unintended consequences of piety. It argues that traditions are neither static, nor 'invented.' On the contrary, they emerge in continuous tension between belief and practice; the ideal and the real, in conversation with their own resources as well as in interaction with the wider socio-political forces. The book aims to bridge the gap between the works in the field of religious studies and those in the field of sociology of movements and thereby, it charts an unusual terrain. It claims that no vision of social change is without a soteriology. Both modernity and religion have their visions of change and their own soteriology. At a 'post-secular' moment, their entanglement needs to be uncovered by raising a new set of questions vis-à-vis religion, secularity and civil society. The book aims to fulfill this task.

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