

The Wrath Of God



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editor 10 October 2008 11907 views

The wrath of gods seems to be descending on the religious Indian masses with perilous frequency as stampedes at pilgrimages kill more people (361 in 2008 alone, and 875 in the last ten years) than even bomb blasts.

The latest in this series was the early morning stampede this month on the first day of Navratra (the nine days religious festivity celebrated all over India) outside the Chamunda Devi Temple on a hillock adjoining Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur .

As a 10,000 strong crowd of devotees surged forward in the wee hours of 1 October 2008, a barricade broke and some men lost their balance on the slopy terrain, made slippery by the flowing coconut waters. The resulting mayhem left 150 dead and several more injured.

Similar unfortunate tragedies have struck in the past in different parts of India (and even abroad in Mecca). Of course, a little more foresight and proper management on the part of organizers could have avoided these mishaps. But with every passing year, the sheer increase in the number of devotees, gathering at religious places, is mind boggling indeed.

As we move forward in the new millennium, our blatant show of religious fervor is increasing at the same rate as our tolerance level is decreasing.

The ever increasing number of puja pandals set up in different cities on Ganesh Chaturthi (a popular festival of Maharashtra) or on Durga Puja (a popular festival of Bengal) bear testimony to religious practices becoming corporately nationalistic. We seem to be inventing new religious functions and icons every day, perhaps to pep up our drab existence.

In the late eighties, a new, hitherto unheard of, goddess by the name of Santoshi Mata became very popular. Women devotees (even from high brow society) thronged her temples (which suddenly manifested everywhere) every Friday after a day long fast. Some enterprising producer even made a film on the goddess, which became an instant hit, raking record profits at the box office and increasing her following. At that time, we also had Sai Baba (the one with flowing robes and a fleet of cars) devotees who would swear to the miracle of holy ash/water oozing from the walls of their prayer rooms amid the chants of devotional songs. Both these figures seem to have lost their sheen now and have been replaced by new findings on the block.

One of the latest to head the popularity chart is Shirdi's Saibaba. Temples dedicated to him invite long lines of bhakts every Thursday, holding the traffic to ransom in many Indian cities. Add to this the ever increasing crowds at Hanuman temples on Tuesdays and at the 'devi jagran' pandals, set up in the middle of already congested roads, with night long blaring of loudspeakers, during Navratri. Our ingenuity has even made us to temporarily construct the famous Vaishno Devi shrine, in our own city, enabling the gullible to reap the benefits of the pilgrimage without even making it. Fasting during the month long period of Ramadan/ nine days of Navratri/ forty days of Lent, or turning a veggie on certain days is the latest fad.

Such a leap of faith should give us spiritual peace and moral strength to combat explosive situations in a peaceful manner. Instead, it seems to be giving us the immoral sanction to rape and kill innocents. The more we throng temples, the more we patronize religious gurus (even the television channels are brimming with their discourses), and the more we pretend to be pious during certain periods the more fanatical we are becoming in our outlook.

As religion becomes a saleable commodity, filling the coffers of temple owners/priests, it is making us poorer in human values, creating more chasms than bridging differences; making us more intolerant and fearful of each other than compassionate; more hateful than loving. So we do not hesitate to indulge in violence of the mind and the body - killing in the name of family honour/ ethnic cleansing/ defense of religious faith. Anger is becoming a collective energy and religion is giving us a Christian, Hindu or Muslim mindset instead of a humane mindset. Religious bigotry is fuelling the ambitions of the overfed to manipulate the emotions of the underfed for selfish and partisan gains.

We have not only become religion conscious but caste/region/ class conscious as well, thanks partially to a skewed up reservation policy and communal agendas of political parties. The sudden spate of sabhas (congregations) like Agarwal Sabha, Brahmin Sabha, Kayastha Sabha etc. speaks of our ghetto mentality. How often do we find two Bengalis converse in their regional language, unmindful of the presence of the others in their group who do not understand it. In our excitement, we tend to forget even the rudiments of basic civility.

Perhaps God wishes us to not make a false show of our religious sentiments by thronging temples but to make our children and ourselves more compassionate and tolerant in our actions. Violence as an expression of our hurt has led to more mass violence and terrorist strikes. Non violence has to become a practical imperative as 'an eye for an eye' is making us blind to the needs of others, to love and peaceful co existence, to the respect for others' right to life.

Let God's will prevail upon everything else and let us start worshipping human values in the precincts of our hearts instead of mouthing hollow words in defense of our shallow religious ideologies.

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