

# FOLK RELIGION – POLITICAL UNDERCURRENTS

(WITH REFERENCE TO INDIA)

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**Abstract:** To establish some relation between folk religion and politics, one could see that the present scenario in the technologically developed world is somewhat different. Thanks to the advent of knowledge in all spheres of human life and scientific and technological development the social as well as political bearing that religion could exercise on modern folk life, peoples' attitudes are becoming different. In fact, man has unravelled many secrets of nature and has successfully combated a host of impediments he was hitherto facing. This has to a large extent influenced our folks' attitude towards religion. Very often religion and castes are confused with each other and we find that the latter is playing a major role in our present day politics. God, religion and such faiths are very much essential for our folks for their community living and they help people to lead an active and dynamic life. Politics these days is most often banking upon the religious faith of the people which obviously emerges in the form of caste differentiation and they try to find their way through such faiths and convictions. Politics manages to be one with our folks exploiting their faith for its own success and survival. Thus, it pretends to respect and safeguard the interests of religions, of course, eventually to meet its own ends.

It would be interesting to study the various religious customs, beliefs and convictions of our folk life and community observations of fairs and festivals and how political interference, though at times helps, but, most often unwanted and unwarranted, causes undue anxiety and disturbs the peace of the community life. The present paper intends to take up some aspects of this issue for a brief study.

**Keywords:** folk religion, politics, interference, India

Folk religion depends on beliefs to a large extent. For that matter, every religion has got ideals of its own. Religion can be very well identified in the very totality of life style in our rural setup. But the unfortunate thing these days is that our political system has reduced the universal meaning of religion to a considerable extent. Owing to constrained feelings, the meaning of religion has been disfigured. Religion and caste are being confused with each other. As a result of this, people are looking at religion suspiciously and sceptically. In folklore, people consider family and community as compared to caste and sect. They are not very much bothered about the intricacies of caste, sect, etc. as conceived or construed in urban circles. To facilitate a smooth living, they conceive their own definitions of social and political framework. The significant point is that almost all-folk activities revolve around their religious framework as an axis. Today we have to note one thing. People are developing some type of outward aversion towards religion. A broad-minded secular feeling is undoubtedly good for the ultimate welfare of the society, if it is taken and initiated in good spirit. But, unfortunately, secularism is being projected as a political tool. No

religion in people, no religion in politics, no religion in sports and so on has been the talk of the day on our platforms. The protagonists of such feeling forget one thing. The bare and bitter fact is that instead of religion, politics is intervening into all corners of life and spoiling the whole atmosphere. In fact, religion should be taken as a necessity, as a controlling factor to safeguard the welfare of the society. Because religion plays a dominant role in our folk society, they live peacefully and contentedly. One has to note that folk religion is more human in nature. How it is accepted and what is the ultimate bearing of religion on folk society is significant to note. Because of its simplicity and unstinted nature, folk religion, in reality, is human religion.

Beliefs and customs function as the backbone of folk religion. It is not necessary that there should be any cause and effect relation between these two things. Rarely at times, such beliefs and customs may have a scientific background behind them. Be there any cause and effect relation or not, it is a fact that religion is embedded in beliefs. Birth, marriage, fairs and festivals happen to be occasions to celebrate happiness whereas occasions like diseases and death ceremonies bring people to share their grief. Thus in one way or the other, folk religion has proved to be a way of folk life. It is an exposition of the folk mind. Here thought and action are not different from one another. The influence of folk religion can be vividly seen on our social and political life of the present day.

In a way religion or Dharma pertains to our way of life. If we go on considering more and more on this topic, it tends to become abstract. In booklore Dharma has a special meaning. Most often all these things come under Hindu Dharma. In fact one could feel that to call these things Hindu Dharma itself might not be right. Throughout the ancient religion we do not find any subjectivity or any extraordinary importance given to any person. Several thinkers have given serious thought to the fundamental aspects of life and their experiences, assertions and outlook towards life, which have paved the way to their philosophies. What they all preached comes under Dharma. In case of religions like Christianity and Islam people take the names of Jesus Christ or the Prophet Mohammad. But as far as Hinduism is concerned no such single name could be taken. There might be some exceptions in Jainism and Buddhism, but ultimately they also have merged into the main stream.

If we look at Indian lifestyle and tradition, we find the mainstream of Dharma has influenced everything within its ambit. In spite of this there are so many different subsidiary currents which maintain their own individuality. Such subsidiary currents actually control the whole life pattern of a specific society that follows them. In folk religion, the village deity or the family deity is treated with utmost respect. For almost all happenings in life, the family deity is worshipped and propitiated. Almost all happenings of life right from birth to death are attributed to the family deity or the village goddess. Similarly each and every ritual in our villages goes in the name of some god or goddess. Father and mother (*maatr* and *pitr*) are in the next place of importance.

Another important feature of all folk religion is that no disinterestedness is shown towards worldly life and happiness. The concept of renunciation or *sanyasa* is

unknown to them. Forsaking worldly life and going behind some abstract happiness in the name of renunciation is unknown to them. In fact, the very essence of folk religion would be seen in the observances and performances of our rural milieu. The background of performances or rituals is nothing but faith or belief. In turn, the basis of any faith could be observed in keenness and interest shown by our villages towards worldly life. In toto, folk religion is confined, to a large extent to this world.

The faith exhibited by our rural masses towards rebirth is very much significant. They firmly believe that if one's life were pure in this birth, one would lead a happier life in the next birth. They always believe that some unknown hand controls their entire life as well as social happiness. They imagine the nature and being of that unknown hand or divinity to be as simple and as transparent as their simple life. They try to honestly comprehend all they imagine about such a divinity. Unlike their urban counterparts, they do not have lofty ideas about religion. For them, it is not a separate entity from their life. And hence we do not find our folks indulging in misdeeds like robbery and murder. Even at such exigencies, we find our folks facing the situation nobly and collectively raising themselves well to the situation. We find a lot of generosity among our rural masses even at times of difficulties and distress. They want to see that the Lord or the deity whom they worship gets maximum attention and importance. Even when people considering themselves to be belonging to upper classes engage in disharmony and quarrel, there are instances where our folks have exhibited their protest by way of some traditional folk dances, rituals, ballads and such other forms. The incident that took place in connection with Puri Jagannath Temple may be cited as an example.

In folk religion magic and witchcraft play an important role. They consult magicians to get rid of difficulties and diseases. A magician is often approached to know the cause of any disease. Using spelled ashes (*bhasma*), to get an amulet or a talisman tied on the hand or shoulder, whenever evil spirits exhort any person they are driven away by observing some rituals or chanting some mantras. Such things are still active in our folk society. Even today our folks are very scared of the magic or sorcery which one person may use to spoil another person. Even items pertaining to the usage of magic are considered to be inauspicious. The magic wands of a wizard, an elbow, a skull, a lemon, a needle etc., are considered to be most inauspicious. Even to look at such things is considered to be bad. *Bhanamati* type of incidents could be quite often seen in our northern part of Karnataka. People often share their experiences with all anxieties and apprehensions about the difficulties they faced because of the notorious magicians from places like Kerala and Kollegal. There are also people thinking on the rational level discarding such happenings and experiences. In their view, such experiences are the results of ignorance and illiteracy. They are not prepared to accept this black magic as a science or a skill. In spite of all such rational claims, most of our cities, towns and villages are being continuously flooded with astrologers, babas, divine worshippers claiming to be the descendants of several divinities. Modern science and technology also have their own contribution in this regard projecting computer astrologers using a few strokes on the keyboard and giving a printout of what is in store for the gullible people who approached them.

Because of the involvement of a super machine like the computer, even the learned urban masses are fairly influenced least doubting the authenticity or the prognosticating faculties of the modern magic machine.

There has always been a struggle between science and religion. There are people saying that even a great scientist like Einstein believed in some superhuman power before he came out with his theory of relativity or the well known equation  $E = mc^2$ . His belief in religion must have been no less than his faith in science. Many modern thinkers might say that there is nothing surpassing human endeavour. They might advocate belief in one's hard work and intellect instead of putting everything in the name of God. Probably they forget that something cannot be achieved to a great extent without having an innate faith in an entity that one firmly believes in. In folk religion, the animal and plant kingdoms as well as several inanimate objects play an important role and such features are being looked at from a modern point of view these days. However, the modern view is more and more practical and business like in nature, probably in every field. People consider items of immediate use to be of relevance. Tomorrows are not important for them.

Scientific thinking, revolutionary advances in technological fields as well as various types of developments in many areas have opened avenues for world level communication. In other words, this has paved the way for a cultural give and take. The impact of religion, wars fought to occupy others' territories and the great losses incurred have made people of the world think in new directions. All these are developments seen during the past one or two centuries. One significant effect of these developments is that people understood the importance of all things around them; they found that no phenomenon is to be discarded totally without due inquiry and examination. Besides modern inventions, our world literature and culture, customs and values have also to be taken into account. As results of such inquiries, many persons of historical importance together with their thoughts and theories have been subjected to a lot of debates and discussions out of which some have survived and others have proved scarcely viable. Those who stand the test of time – whether persons or their contributions – have really transcended the barriers of space and time.

Traditions and customs are being seen both scientifically and otherwise. Something considered scientific today might be turned down as unscientific tomorrow. Just as new things are accepted continuously, old things are being discarded. Often the level and way of discarding things reach culminating heights. This is really dangerous. Probably the present lifestyle and unattached attitude of people may be the reason behind this. In the name of rationalism, people are often becoming so indifferent about their culture, beliefs and customs. In the name of scientific outlook, God and beliefs are being considered as superstitious. Such things eventually are proving to be impediments to viewing things with an overall outlook and taking up an in-depth study.

To conclude, we always find some basic truth behind any belief or custom. Similarly every custom or ritual comes as a part of performance or a celebration. Broadly speaking, no ritual or folk performance is without sense and use. At least, the performing social group would get some consolation and peace of mind by such

things. In the name of cultural activities like fairs and festivals, it will be a nice thing to watch our folks exchanging good will, greeting one another, sharing experiences, mingling culturally and so on. After all what charm could there be in life without such things? If our beliefs and rituals could accomplish this, the purpose is served. Our fairs and festivals and *melas* have their social and political purposes also. They bring people together in all these areas. They find occasions and opportunities to have discussions and exchange views on contemporary world and political matters. Thus we find a lot of influence of folk religion on politics. India being a country of villages, folk religion opens a number of avenues for our people to apprise themselves of the political undercurrents that will be continuously flowing within. Whenever one considers a study of such political undercurrents, one has to be careful enough to consider the aspects of folk religion and its bearing on present day politics in an appropriate and suitable manner.

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