

by Ramesh Menon

WE are a nation in crisis. We know how corrupt we have become. Now, violence erupts every second day, a symptom of our terminal illness. We are facing an immense spiritual crisis. The BJP says that the Congress pseudo-secularism is the root of the disease. But, the BJP's cure, Hindu *rashtra*, will never go down well with our minorities, who number some two hundred million souls. Will it go down with God himself?

For almost 40 years, in the name of secularism, religious instruction was kept out of our schools. We surgically excised the spiritual dimension from our educational mainstream and, thus, in time, from our national consciousness.

In 1947, after a bloody Partition, secularism seemed logical. But look at what we've sunk to, 40 years after we have severed our spiritual roots. And where is the communal harmony secularism was meant to foster? The minorities nurtured their religions. But, in a decade, the Hindu majority produced a generation which had lost touch with its ancient faith, its soul.

Baring a very few private schools, education in modern India was an arid rationalist's domain. Jesuit schools still taught the Bible to its Christian pupils. Madarsas taught the Koran, but the government schools had no religious education for the Hindus majority. For the young Hindu, God became an old joke.

Today, when a Hindu professes his religion he tacitly endorses the BJP. How many of us draw a *Lakshman rekha* between Hinduism and the Sangh Parivar? Let us remember, the two aren't the same thing. One is the essence of tol-

erance, the other is just the opposite.

In the *Mahabharata*, Dharma Deva appears as a Yaksha, and Yudhishtira must answer his questions to save his brothers' lives. One is: 'What is the highest virtue?' The answer, unforgettably, is: 'Liberality'.

Modern times have caught up with us, dizzily. We are facing consumerism and globalisation on a scale we couldn't have dreamt of, five years ago. Western winds are sweeping through the windows of our minds, our TV screens. *Santa Barbara* and *Dynasty* have become our *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Talk-shows and game-shows have replaced the *Gita*, *Koran* and *Bible*. An advertisement jingle has become our national anthem, MTV provides our *bhajans*,

The swiftness of change is amazing. More than ever, we have need of spiritual roots to anchor our lives, a still place at the heart of the storm. Which Hindu grand mother has the time to tell her grandchildren the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, or teach them the *Gita*? Which grandchild has the time to listen, between a crushing school syllabus and TV? For the common man life has become a remorseless struggle for survival.

So, the young Hindu rediscovers his roots from illiberal mentors, for whom going to a temple is synonymous with establishing a *Hindu-rashtra* founded on Vedic principles, suppressing the Muslim and, who knows, perhaps the Dravidian

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The State's ostrich attitude towards God has led to the hijacking of the Hindu religion by illiberal men, and the positions between the faiths have hardened, perhaps irreparably. It is time the Indian State reclaimed God and his plural worship in the name of the Indian people.

The religious minorities in India haven't, yet, lost touch with their faiths as profoundly as the Hindu has. The Hindu has flung his soul out with the secular bathwater. Perhaps, this is the very crime for which we suffer these dark times, when India seems to have become a cursed nation.

There is no doubt the Congress is responsible—the way to hell is paved with good intentions. But, the Congress was also the party responsible for the stifling social economy we lived with for almost 40 years. If they have put that behind them, they can think again about religious education.

If churches have opened for worship in Russia, why can't the *Ramayana*, the *Puranas* and the *Gita* be taught in Indian schools, and also the *Koran*, the *Bible* and the *Granth Sahib*? Such a historic step

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would be more acceptable to the entire nation if it came from Narasimha Rao's secular Government, rather than from a B JP one. We can also hope that the form it takes will be more liberal. Imaginative classes on religion could even be centralised on Doordarshan.

All signs are, that the day will come when religion is taught again in Indian schools. The question is, will the experienced Congress take the fateful step, in a cautious, plural manner, or will it be the B JP, athirst for Hindu-*rashtral* Better the devil you know, than the one you don't. I think the ball is still in the Congress' court, and God waits in the sidelines.

In Indonesia, for instance, every school-child learns his own religion. He also learns the elements of five major faiths, and that each one is a different path to the same God. They call this system Pancasila, and it works in a 90 per cent Muslim, rapidly modernising, country. They have found a balance.

Just as, on Kurukshetra, Krishna's final battle was fought not with weapons, but with a song of wisdom, our battle can never be won in the political arena. If we want lasting victory, we must take the fight to the nation's classrooms, to our children's hearts. And it must be a battle for peace that all of us can win, Hindu and Muslim, Sikh and Christian, Buddhist, Jain and Jew. Otherwise, we can expect another *Mahabharata*, a bloody civil war we will all lose.

As with economic reform, we can't expect overnight miracles with religious education. But we can hope that the generations to come will rediscover spiritual health. At least, we can hope. But we must take the first, hardest step, and put our trust in God, the Healer.

To worship is a basic human need. Politicians, film-stars and cricketers have replaced our *avatars* and *munis*, our *sufis*, saints and prophets, while the greedy god-men, each one claiming to be God himself, have a field day.

Gandhiji fought for Independence with God and truth on his side. Then, as soon as we were free, we killed Gandhiji off and shut God, whom we couldn't kill, away in a dark room. The results are all around us, in every sphere of our lives, in our very homes.

The violence in Kashmir, Punjab and Assam are warnings, so were the deaths of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi; and so much more, every day, the endless suffering of our people. God waits in the wings. We have turned our backs on him, but he hasn't forsaken us. But, we hardly want to know him, any more, and allow hatred and cynicism to consume us. Again and again, violence erupts, demonically, and we shut our eyes, and go back to our everyday lives. While, the nation and, with it, those very lives plunge deeper into hell. Which is what we are leaving our children, as our legacy to them.

We have become a petty people, a nation that has lost its nationalism, its soul. Look at the faces on any street, how many are serene or happy? There's always a Hindi film or *Santa Barbara* to escape to, for a while, the evening drink, an affair, to numb the pain of rich and poor, the collective anguish of us all.