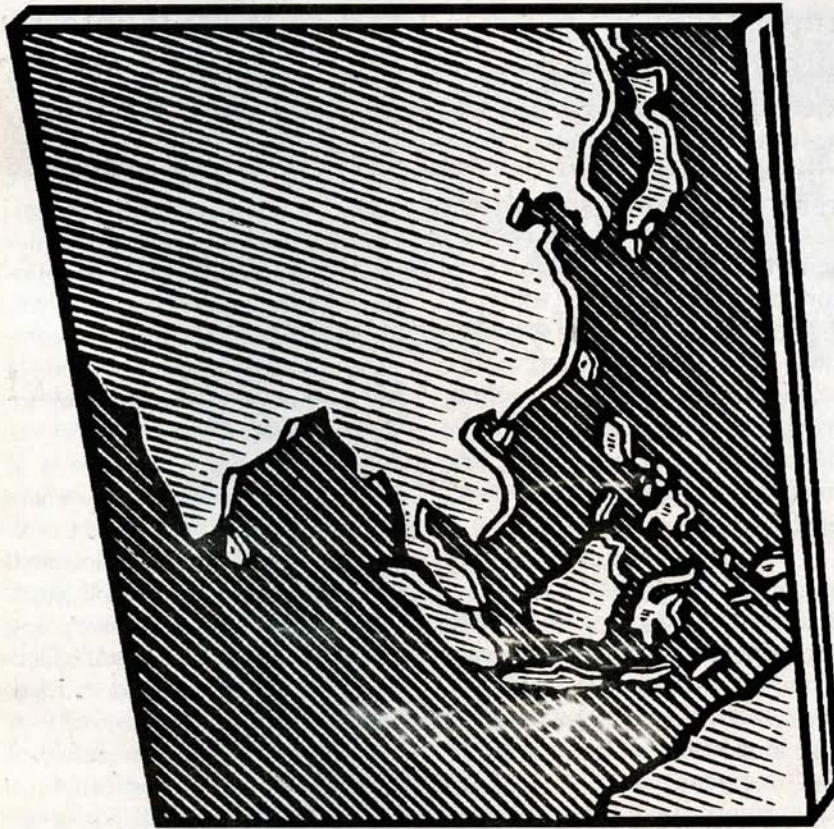


# Maps of Learning



Ninian Smart, Shivesh Thakur, Eds. *Ethical and Political Dilemmas of Modern India* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), cloth.

Peter van der Veer. *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), paper \$14.95.

These two books differ in style and tone, but common in their desire to examine the contemporary crises in India. Together, these books offer stimulating, provocative material. The Indian social situation is so complex and volatile that one has the obligation to enter into the continuous conversation about these issues. It is the strength of that conversation that will "save us" from the senseless violence and fanaticism so pervasive in India today.

For those who want to learn

about the complexity, either as outsiders or as immigrants, the books offer a map of learning, and a very valuable one at that. Smart and Thakur offer a good rationale for such interest. They believe that both traditionally and in modern times, India has worked as a "laboratory of human experience." So long as one approaches India as a case worth studying in its own right, instead of "making it" into a laboratory, that is a fine motive.

Smart and Thakur have brought together four broad themes, which, along with what the other book has to offer, may serve as examples to understand the contemporary world (and India) that is beset with crises of religion, nationalism, cultural diversity and resistance to power and

oppression. Nothing could be more wide-ranging than that. The four themes of Smart and Thakur's book are: violence and non-violence, rights of human beings (and their cultural origins), the place of women and the feminine and the relationship between the State and religion. The essays assembled in this collection address these themes in academic but fairly accessible language.

Beginning with Ivan Strenski's meditation on Brutus and the Bhagavad Gita, some of these writers are concerned with the place of violence in Indian society. Arvind Sharma invokes that fearful quote from a Bajrang Dal volunteer which takes the legacy of Nathuram Godse (Mahatma Gandhi's assassin) seriously and wishes to pursue violence at all costs. The recent rise of Bharatiya Janata Party, with the Advani-advocated dogmatism of Hindutva and Hindu extremism, combined with such pronouncements bring a heavy uneasiness to the stomach. India, despite Gandhi's efforts, hasn't had any firm tradition of non-violence, but it is not unique in its use of violence either. When Strensky accuses India of not practicing "controlled and principled use of force in public affairs," we don't know who or what he has in mind.

What is particularly scary about India is not its exclusive right to violence, but its tendency to resort to violence by blending it with motives that are, at least on the face of it, religious or downright fuzzy and idealistic. To that extent, all attempts to relate Hindu fanaticism to Nazism ring true. Iran is another example of that phenomenon as well.

What makes India hard to

fathom is its "appearance" as a non-violent place. Equally difficult is the impression that its violence is somehow connected to "pure and simple" motives of religious domination. These writers could learn a lot from Peter van der Veer's book, *Religious Nationalism*, which will become an important landmark in the current debate on the topic. For him, the uncanny and complicated alliance between search for collective ("national") identity gets mixed up with an already up-for-grabs tendency of religion. The resulting mixture works as a simple image from outside, but as an explosive dynamite from inside.

Mark Jurgensmeyer in the Smart & Thakur book offers an interesting thought. The Hindu nationalism, he says, is more a result of India's entry into the worldwide political and economic system which requires (ironically) separate nation-states for participation. These secularists don't like "religious nationalism" because it is primitive or anti-modern while in fact it is an attempt to enter the modern world. Now that is provocation! Besides providing a justification to the already-out-of-control fanatics, this half-baked theory may end up baking up that part of the world.

A more patient, thoughtful and relevant view is presented by Peter van der Veer in *Religious Nationalism*. The book is directly related to the Ayodhya situation in two ways. First, it is an outgrowth of author's earlier experiences and anthropological studies around Ayodhya. He speaks with a great deal of informed and sensible knowledge. Second, the book addresses the recent political situation of Ayodhya in its religious, historical and social dimensions. More accessible and stronger in scholarship than the Smart & Thakur book, van der Veer's work promises to be on our minds for a long time.

Peter van der Veer engages us in the process of "construction" of nationalism, especially in the shadow of colonialism. Then he tells us how religion got hold of nationalist feelings and created a unique hybrid that brought us to the current conflicts. He warns us against making simple judgments, especially those that appear to be politically expedient and dangerous. There is caution in his conclusion that Indians and outsiders stop romanticizing either the unifying aspect of Hinduism or its eternally fluid character. We got here in this mess of Muslim-Hindu conflicts because the weight of our past feels like a burden on our backs, determining our steps into the present and future.

Another painful notion for outsiders is the "cultural" idea in India that individual rights are not related to the interests of the community in the way they are in the West. Most people make this mistake in their understanding of the East in general. That is why Chinese rulers have been making mockery of the naiveté of the U. S. State Department for the last decade. It is not that individuals don't count in the East, but that there are other factors, such as community and groups which count as well and in ways that is not easy to understand. Purushottama Billimoria's essay in the Smart & Thakur book provides an excellent background of this problem both from the Western and Indian perspective.

Essays on women and the feminine in the Smart & Thakur book linger around the most troublesome and well known issues of contradictions in Indian culture. How can a culture that values the feminine at the level of spiritual and divine end up abusing the specific mortal females on this earth. Often, the apologists for the "greatness" of India will defend their treatment of

women by saying that the outsiders don't understand it. Indians, they say, may abuse women at home, but they ultimately hold the feminine in high regard. This argument should have passed ages ago, but it continues to be the blind spot of liberalism in India. Essays by John Grimes ("Feminism and Indian Goddess: Different Models"), Tracy Pintchman ("The Ambiguous Female"), and Julius J. Lipner ("On Women and Salvation in Hinduism") are esoteric at best. These authors know that the issue is complex, but they are also oblivious of the perennially difficult relationship between the divine and the everyday. Religion, believe it or not, does not breathe anywhere except in the little actions of individuals. Oppression is real, even if its justifications are metaphysical.

Perhaps the most intriguing essay in the Smart & Thakur collection is by Bart Gruzalski entitled, "The Chipko Movement: A Gandhian Approach to Ecological Sustainability and Liberation from Economic Colonization." This piece is not just historically informative, but it provides one of the underrepresented sides of Indian social life in bright light. The Chipko movement of environmental activism utilizes Gandhian techniques effectively, demonstrating what sustained political activism can bring to the lives of people.

It is this side of activist political and social life in India that gives hope in the midst of religious fanaticism and State/bureaucratic incompetence and corruption. This is not simply an issue of finding a silver lining in an otherwise depressing issue. Myriad of social movements like these are changing the face of India, and simultaneously writing a chapter on political resistance or the world community in the post-whatever era.

— Shekhar Deshpande