University of Ghent, Belgium

Rethinking Religion in India

Rethinking Religion in India is a five year international conference cluster. It is jointly organised by the Research Centre Vergelijkende Cultuurwetenschap (Ghent University, Belgium), India Platform UGent (Ghent University), the Centre for the Study of Local Cultures (Kuvempu University, India) and the Karnataka Academy of Social Sciences and Humanities (India). The second edition will focus on Rethinking Secularism and will be held in New Delhi from 10th to 13th January, 2009.

At a time when the world is increasingly taking notice of India's rapid economic growth, it is also becoming aware of tensions between its various communities, between Muslims, Hindus, Christians, different caste groups, etc. The recent violence against Christians in Orissa is just one of many such examples that have reached the world's front pages. Debates about these issues however have str added in ideological terms, and hardly involve any scientific analyses of the problems.

The conference organisers want to change something about this state of affairs. In the framework of the second Rethinking Religion in India conference they want to bring together Indian and international academics to start a serious debate about the way in which India's problems of communal conflicts have been understood and approached so far.

Ever since India's independence in 1947, secularism has been put forward as the only way to protect the nation against communal strife. The conference organisers want to address the issue that, despite the implementation of the secular state, conflicts between India's communities only seem to increase. The recurrent communal riots, the rise of Hindutva from the 1980s onwards and key events like the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, are only a few examples.

However, the reflections and debates on the nature of the Indian culture and society have been hijacked by the ideological struggle between secularism and Hindutva, the organisers say. India's politicians and intelligentsia are now divided into two opposing camps, which claim to exhaust the realm of political and cultural possibilities for the country. Textbooks are written to represent one of the two positions; social science research generally aims to confirm the views of one camp; academics are appointed as partisans. The debates on India in North America and Europe are caught up in the same straitjacket. Under the motto of "Rethinking Secularism," this conference will examine the limitations of this conceptual framework shared by Hindutva and secularism. It aims to initiate the scientific debate that is highly needed today.

Rejuvenating the social sciences in India

The five-year conference cluster Rethinking Religion in India is part of a larger objective of rejuvenating the social sciences in India. The double pressures of industrialization and globalization are having alarming and distorting effects on institutions of higher education in India. Not only is there a mushrooming of engineering colleges without the concern for a balance between different domains of learning (in natural and social sciences) but there is also a disproportionate entry of bright students into such colleges, which emphasize information and communication technologies (ICT).

In order to change this situation the Research Centre Vergelijkende Cultuurwetenschap and Kuvempu University have jointly taken the initiative of setting up a Karnataka Academy of Social Sciences and Humanities (KASSH). The aim of the KASSH is to make research and education in social sciences and humanities relevant to Indian society and to bring the social sciences into the curricula of IT and engineering colleges. To achieve this aim the KASSH will work together with the India Platform UGent which has recently been set up at Ghent University in Belgium. The conference Rethinking Religion in India will play an important role in this joint endeavour.