

Subir Roy: Gods of our fathers

The religion I grew up with at home was deeply benign and laid down no taboos, and only urged you to pursue self-improvement

As a judge, my father was a natural rationalist, with little time for social taboos, not to speak of the superstitions that lay behind some of them. Though not overtly religious, he made one exception: he was deeply devoted to his gurudev, “Mauni Baba”, as we called him because of the vow of silence he had taken.

Sri Sri Madhavananda Giri Maharaj (as Mauni Baba was formally known) belonged to a high order of Shiva worshippers and cared little for the many taboos like rules of contamination that order Hindu daily life. Naturally, perhaps, since Shiva himself was a social outsider. Life in his ashram centred on the exposition of religious texts morning and evening. Mauni Baba, vastly learned, would write a sloka in pencil, which would then be expounded upon by a learned devotee. To follow him, all you had to do was to understand the good word and try to live the good life. Beyond the scriptures, to his devotees he was a perennial mountain-spring of affection that never dried up.

Once my father retired, Mauni Baba made him the ashram committee’s *pradhan*. My father’s great achievement was to use his legal skills to free a plot of land on the banks of the Ganga under litigation. (“It was Baba who made it happen through my hands,” my father said.) A modest ashram has come up there, and to me the best spot in it is the verandah of the temple to Nageshwar. You can sit there for hours and watch the river go by. So the religion that I grew up with at home was deeply benign and laid down no taboos, only urging you to pursue self-improvement on the road to *moksha*.

But my parents also sent me to an English-medium boarding school founded by Christian missionaries which, along with drilling into us a bit of character, also shoved down our throats a lot of the New Testament and Protestant rituals (we boarders had to go to church on Sundays). My takeaway from those years is some of the best Christian texts, like the prayer of St Francis of Assisi later adapted by Mother Teresa, and a lifelong addiction to Christmas carols. I am amazed how the story of the Nativity never fails to move, year after year.

Then I went to Presidency College, known for its non-believing iconoclastic traditions, set by Henry Derozio in the early nineteenth century, which applied rational questioning to every tenet. As a result, I acquired a healthy disregard for organised religion. And this is the mixed baggage of two faiths, with allegiance to none, that our son has seen around him as he has grown up.

His own encounter with religion came in Mumbai, where he is trying to find a career in film-making. His search for truly modest accommodation has taken him to Malwani, which lies on the outskirts of the city. A former fishing village, since the seventies it has seen a substantial inflow of poor up-country Muslims. Now it is lower-middle class, with garbage on the street and a single bank ATM.

The religious connect began when, seeing the scraggly growth on his chin, an elderly vendor mistook our son for a Muslim and said, “*Beta, hamara bahot dard hai*” (son, we carry a huge load of pain and suffering). Living in a neighbourhood of poor Muslims with Ramzan practised all around – and his random readings of ancient food habits, in which man alternately feasted and fasted depending on whether he got a kill or not – has made him experiment with daylong fasts as a dieting exercise.

Then one day, on a visit to Kolkata, amidst talk among relatives of pilgrimages and going to Tirupati, he declared he would like to pay a visit to Mecca and Medina, if he was allowed in. It startled those around him. Later, he explained to me how he was struck by ordinary vulnerable people surviving by anchoring themselves to faith. Religion played a therapeutic role for them. It is something they could not choose but only embrace. He felt sad that rationality and science denied the likes of him this anchor of faith and the fortitude it gave. Perhaps spending some time among people pulled to pilgrimage by a powerful faith would yield some insights.

I am not totally alien to things religious, he qualified. He loved going into a beautiful church; few things made his day as did a really well-rendered, tuneful early-morning azan. That’s about where I had left off, I realised. So it goes on — this engagement with religion that acquires more baggage and gets enriched with every generation.
