

The Deification Syndrome

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

Fifty-two years ago I was Collector of Betul, a beautiful hilly district nestled in the heights of the Satpura Mountains, richly afforested, the happy haunt of wildlife, in fact Mowgli country. This is the district in which the Tapti rises and it is the very home of the best teak in the world, C.P. teak. It is also inhabited by Gonds and Korkus and the three years I spent there were the happiest in my life. My favourite place was a village called Kukru in which at a height of about 3,700 ft on top of a hill stands a forest rest house constructed by a British officer more than 150 years ago. My favourite time was to go there in the monsoon and sit in the compound of the rest house, surrounded by clouds almost like Juno sitting on Mount Olympus, watching the rain cascading down the arc of the rock opposite and falling straight into the valley. After I left the district some people named a particular spot from which I loved watching the sunset as Buch Point by which named it is still known. In 1984 I visited Kukru and found that near this place a Korku tribes man was anointing a rock with sindoor. When I asked him what he was doing he said that he was worshipping Buch Baba. When asked who this person was he said he was a saint born centuries ago and was in fact a god. He refused to believe that I was standing before him and that there was no Buch Baba, but he refused to believe me. I thus achieved deification in my own lifetime and this has always made me wonder whether the thirty-three crore devtas and devis of the Hindu pantheon are not in fact, like me, some character whom some gullible person has deified. In other words, are they not, like me, just figments of our imagination?

The moral of the above story is that regardless of the origin of the Hindu pantheon, we have the tendency of deification. The Sai Baba of Sirdi never claimed divinity, nor asked for a temple in his name. It is his devotees who promoted the cult of worship of a person who was truly saintly, ascetic and deeply philosophical. Mahatma Gandhi was a great patriot, had complete belief in ahimsa and he embraced poverty because he identified with the poor. This man promoted no cult, he did not present himself as someone extraordinary, he was humble to a fault, he sought no power or position and he undertook self purification fasts when others sinned. He was not God, but he symbolised the very soul of India and, therefore, without deifying him it is mete and proper that we consider him to be not only a national icon but the national icon. There is no one in the history of India, not even the avatars, who can claim the same space in our collective hearts as the Mahatma, not as God but as the quintessential Indian. Independent India, therefore, honours itself when it collectively celebrates his birthday and mourns his death.

However, since 1947 the process of creating icons and virtually deifying them has gone absolutely haywire. There is a distinct cult of Nehru, because sycophantic Indians in Nehru's lifetime itself created out of him a figure much larger than life. The place where Gandhi was cremated is today a national monument, as is that of Jawaharlal Nehru. His successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, a modest, honest man stood like a rock in 1965 during the Indo-Pak War and he certainly deserves our gratitude, but does that include the conversion of his house into a museum and his cremation place into a monument? What about Indira Gandhi who, among other things, attempted to establish authoritarian rule by imposition of a state of Emergency? Does she merit deification or should she be demonised? Should government programmes, Delhi's airport and so many roads and buildings be named after her? Does Rajiv Gandhi merit such national recognition? The latest is the attempt by Charan Singh's son to hang on to an official bungalow and demand that it be converted into a national monument.

Indians by nature are superstitious, gullible and easily misled. That is why a cleric from Deoband can issue a Fatwa prohibiting Muslims from sending a girl child above the age of ten to a school. Should not this cleric has been promptly arrested and subjected to legal process with a view to penalising him? Is wearing the sign of the sunnat or the robes of a sadhu make one immune from legal accountability? This can only happen in India because individually and collectively we are prepared to give at least demi god status to charlatans, if not outright status of a deity. This nation cannot progress unless it cleanses its mind of blind faith and superstition. Respect for great people is legitimate, their deification is completely wrong.

I must congratulate the present government for its recent decision that no government buildings will now be converted into monuments commemorating a person, however distinguished. The State, at public expense, will only celebrate the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi and commemorate his death anniversary. In the case of every other leader, even Jawaharlal Nehru, the family, a Trust or a nongovernment public body is welcome to hold celebrations and commemorations, but the State will not participate and there will be no money allotted from the public exchequer. This is a very welcome decision of government and I would like to congratulate the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, for it. The State must now seriously engage in promoting the concept of secularism which is enshrined in the Preamble to the Constitution. The State, whilst respecting and considering as equal all religions, must stand outside the confines of religion and instead tackle tasks of national regeneration and development. That is the only logical path to follow after its decision to stop the process of public deification of individuals.
