

Religious Publishing, Nationalism and the Hindu

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The Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India

By Akshaya Mukul;

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Akshaya Mukul's *Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India* presents a fascinating narrative of growth of Gita Press and its role in forming the public discourse on Hindu religion. The narrative is based on rich archive material with particular focus on Gita Press' magazine *Kalyan* and large correspondence between its editor and contributors. Mukul places the Gita Press narrative within three contexts, i.e. growth of Hindi as language of Hindustan, the running of a non-profit organisation by the Marwari community, and the political and communal tensions from the 1920s onwards. The book tracks the journey of Gita Press which begins with its founder Jaydayal Goyandka's need to have Gita discussion groups and then successively expanding its purpose to reforming the Marwari community or their social standing and to propagate the principles of Hindu *sanatan dharma*. The dominant thread of the narrative, nothing new in today's context as well, is the fear of Hinduism and Hindus in danger, and the utmost need to return to the principles of Hindu *sanatam dharma*. The book is divided into six sections which captures different strands of Gita Press' narrative beginning with account of its founder and editor, its different publications with a special focus on *Kalyan*, its contributors, and finally to its role in public discourse on Hindu religion and its 'moral universe'. Mukul mentions that the Gita Press is the only publishing house to survive from the colonial period; and it has a strong subscription base even today. One of the reasons, Mukul explains, for the Gita Press' continuing success is its decision to not remain "aloof to changes in politics"; and hence, this book broadly attempts to explore "how the goals of religious publishing house in a small UP town intersect with the aim of communal Hindu organisation and nationalism at flashpoints in history from 1926".

Given the current wave of Hindutva discourse in Indian public and domestic sphere, Mukul's book gives an opportunity to understand the layers through which a conservative Hindu mind speaks. He tracks selected trajectories through numerous issues of *Kalyan* and maps them to its editor, Hanuman Prasad Poddar's correspondences and other historical events. What lends richness to the narrative, even though mostly dependent on *Kalyan*, is simultaneous exploration of *Kalyan*'s relationship with other contemporary magazines such *Hindu Panch* (1925) and *Chand* (1922).

Mukul also explores the persona of Poddar in detail and its impact on how Gita Press builds a stronger presence in Hindu discourse, and the economics of a non-profit publishing house. One

of the fascinating things about Gita Press' history is the ability of Poddar, its editor, to bring in a diverse group of contributors ranging from mendicants, and conservatives to scholars, and liberals – some of them even with contrary viewpoints. One is intrigued by its editor's decision to bring together such a eclectic group of contributors given Poddar's clear stand on untouchability and maintenance of varna system.

The book presents the complexity of relationships that have made such an enterprise possible – one such relationship is between Poddar and Gandhi, which to some extent, reflects the Gita Press' increasing influence over public discourse and the emergence of sectarian organisations. However, despite contradictions and dilemmas, the dominant narrative of the supremacy of Hindu sanatan dharma and the need to protect it from imminent danger never gets diluted for the publishing house. Gita Press' history shows a fair number of struggles such as worker strikes, corruption, sex scandal, plagiarism and so on, but it still manages to overcome each of these blows to affirm its public standing. One reason for this is Poddar, or Gita Press' ability to address a range of audiences. One of the instances where Mukul carefully tracks this ability is the discourse on the Hindu Code Bill. Poddar, through *Kalyan*, employs different strategies to oppose the passing of the Hindu Code Bill – it begins by asking its readers to send letters to Nehru opposing government's proposal to pass the Bill; underscoring the Bill because it lacks authoritative voice; referring to the constitutional principle of secularism to let religion stay in the private sphere, and lastly, by creating a probable situation along with dire consequences if the Bill gets passed. The discourse around the Hindu Code Bill, and many similar discourses, employs a range of persuasive practices to address a diverse set of Hindu conservative minds; and to confirm and re-confirm the dominant narrative of fear through it. Another aspect of *Kalyan*'s discourse is its ability to weave facts and myths together to present an argument – and perhaps with the purpose of blurring the divide between them; and keep re-narrating the glory of ancient Hindu past and its contemporary relevance.

The book gets repetitive at times because it carefully interprets and re-interprets the archive materials to delineate specific trajectories especially of the “making of Hindu India”. It is an recommended read for those who want to understand what makes a sectarian organisation stronger at a discourse level even though that discourse doesn't get completely translated into action – as in the case of ban on cow slaughter or the Hindu Code Bill. Lastly, understanding a sectarian mind through such a historical narrative gives an opportunity to understand the popular imagination of Hindu and the associated politics.