

'You can't create a country on the basis of fear'(THE HINDU)



Diana L Eck is the professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University— Photo: Special arrangement

Diana L. Eck speaks to The Hindu on her experience of India, and on issues of pluralism and tolerance.

Diana L Eck is the professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University. Over decades of her travels in India's pilgrimage sites, particularly Varanasi, she has written several books, which include *Banaras: City of Light* , *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* , and *India: A Sacred Geography* . She is the founder of The Pluralism Project, a web-based resource for various Indian communities in the United States. In 1998, she received the National Humanities Medal from then US President Bill Clinton. She is on a visit to Mumbai to deliver the Vasant J Sheth Memorial Lecture titled 'Sacred Rivers, the Lifelines of India.' Ahead of her talk on Tuesday, she spoke to *The Hindu* on her experience of India, and on issues of pluralism and tolerance.

Has the Indian people's relationship with rivers undergone a change?

That really is not for me to say. Look at the enormous number of people converging at the Kumbh Mela for example. The gatherings at Nashik and Simhastha in Ujjain are becoming bigger. I can't

measure in terms of population. I was in Varanasi during Makar Sankranti and there was a huge outpouring of people all along the Ganga. It looks to me that rivers are still the primary altars of religious life in India. The issue of fresh running water is important not just for the religious lives of the Hindus, but for the nation, its people. Not very much has been done for the Ganga, though. Despite many iterations of the Ganga Action Plan, there hasn't been much action. We still have a multitude of *nullahs* and raw sewage pouring into the river. Many earlier studies have proposed ways of channelling the *nullahs* and sewage leakages into a deep pipe system that would be carried into some large settling base. But there hasn't even been a pilot. Some beautification measures have taken place, but these are not effective in addressing the problem. They are important as ways of addressing the attitude.

Why does Varanasi have a special place in the West's imagination of India?

The experience of dawn along the river in Varanasi is profoundly moving. Also, the encounter with death on a day-to-day basis; the fact that death is not excluded from daily activity. There is a kind of integration of life and death at Manikarnika or Harishchandra ghats, which is both healthy and profound. Varanasi also has a reputation for being a city of ebullient life, commerce and culture, and at the same time a place where people come to die.

Do you think as a land of diversity, India is pluralistic?

By pluralism, I don't mean just tolerance or diversity, but an engagement with that diversity. Out of diversity we build a common culture. On the whole, India has done that. Some would say the foundation of Indian pluralism is basically Hindu. There is also the great legacy of the Sufis in India that is still extant, and of Islam. India has a long experience with day-to-day pluralism. Sometimes it breaks down and you have eruptions of communalism: your neighbours suddenly become enemies. One struggles to understand this. Is it only because our differences are being exploited by fearmongering politicians? In the United States, we have a fear industry telling everyone that we should be afraid of immigrants and Muslims. Fear is a dangerous thing. You can't create a country on the basis of fear. You can't have a democracy in which we fear our neighbours.

How do caste divisions and practices fit into the concept of Indian unity?

That's a difficult question to answer, because it poses a whole set of differences that are not so much religious, but social. In an ideal world, you could say India is a society in which community is not based on sameness. There is the idea that you are born into different kinds of skills. We have different religious and caste backgrounds, but it does not mean we don't fit together and cannot function harmoniously. Because we can never all be equal, except spiritually. The question is how we live creatively with our differences, and in India that includes caste differences. Some differences have been slightly erased in urban areas.

Recent events in India have highlighted secularism and religious tolerance due to some violent incidents related to the beef ban law. Do these incidents point perhaps to a Brahminical supremacist view of Indian culture?

For someone who lives in the US and has not lived in India for months at a time, the consciousness of what it means to be one nation composed of different people is quite high. So when you see

chauvinism or fundamentalism, people are uncomfortable with that. People being attacked on the suspicion of eating beef makes headlines in the US because it is provocative. It is appalling actually. The idea that there would be legislation on what you eat in a country like India, where people eat many different kinds of things, becomes leverage for violence. People would say that Brahminical culture is on the wane. So much of Hindu culture is unfazed by Brahminical structures. It is popular bhakti religiousness.

Some reviews of your book *India – A Sacred Geography* say your evidence contradicts the idea that India was not a nation before the British came. Would you like to elaborate?

The idea of a nation state is new even in the West. There were practices of pilgrimage articulating a sacred geography, which are ancient. The practice, for instance, of going from Kerala or Tamil Nadu to Badrinath is a geography put in place by the footprints of pilgrims.

On a personal note, how has the experience of India changed for you over the years?

My experience was shaped by going to places like Omkareshwar, Narmada, Kaveri, or Godavari.

Now I don't do travel much. Because of traffic and crowding in India, travel has become more hectic. A lot has changed.