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MEHRA, KUSHAL. *NASTIK: WHY I AM NOT AN ATHEIST*. BLUONE INK. 2024.

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In the present globalised age, where almost every sphere of society is being aided by Artificial Intelligence (AI), religion has started to have little impact on individuals. The world has started to shift from the traditional belief of a ‘*Supreme Being*’ to relying more on machines and AI. This has further encouraged a sense of individuality, placing the individual at the forefront and emphasising the urge to live independently. The religious doctrine which preached the gospel of God’s creation of the universe and everything that lives in it has been slowly replaced by Western atheism, which demonises religion in all possible ways. This book by Kushal Mehra has arrived at a timely moment, which depicts and navigates the reason why he does not believe in atheism and follows the Hindu religion. It is presented in a well-written manner.

The author has stated that the Hindu philosophy of the realisation of *Brahman* is the way to achieve the ultimate goal of life, and the state of liberation is the highest spiritual attainment, which cannot be sought in the realm inhabited by artificial intelligence. The author further states that since *Brahman* is the fundamental concept in Hindu philosophy, it is described as the essence of all existence. In this sense, the author does not believe in placing individuals at the forefront and denying religion, but instead stresses more about the relevance of religion as it transcends both the physical and material worlds. The author has also traced the origin of religion, thus proving the point of the existence of a “*God*”, which in turn denies the concept of “*atheism*.” The origin and existence of a “*God*” and religion may have been proven through the integration of archaeological and historical analysis. The author further states that traces of religious

behaviour were found in the Upper Palaeolithic period (around 50,000-10,000 BCE). The cave paintings found in various regions around the world may also suggest symbolic, ritualistic or spiritual purposes, and the burial practices, specifically by the Neanderthals, have also suggested the beliefs of the ancestors in an afterlife or forms of worship. These findings, as argued by the author, are enough proof of the existence of a Supreme Being, which has convinced the author to be religious and not follow “*atheistic*” beliefs.

In the book, the author differentiates between *Nāstika*, *Nirīśvaravāda* and atheism in the West. *Nāstikas* reject the authority of the Vedas wholly. *Nirīśvaravāda* has been described by the author as a philosophical idea with an origin in Indian philosophy, and its equivalent term in English is that of “*atheism*.” This school of thought denies the existence of an all-powerful being in the universe who is the creator of all life on earth. The *Nirīśvaravādīs* have concentrated on investigating “*The nature of reality, the self, and the human predicament without referring to the existence of a divine being...*” (p 7). Atheism in the West denies the origin of a divine being as well and challenges the religious authorities to the fullest extent. The author has classified the differences between Western and Eastern atheism, where atheism in Western societies emerged as a negative reaction to counter theistic beliefs which arose from the longing to have “*...secularism and individual autonomy...*” (p 44). However, Eastern atheism has more of an open-armed attitude as compared to Western atheism, which completely rejects religious ideologies. Eastern atheism has a more inclusive and pluralistic set of beliefs in terms of spirituality. These differences help open the eyes of the readers and help them understand how atheism is understood across different contexts. Even though Eastern atheism rejects religious ideologies, it still maintains a close connection to its cultural and philosophical roots (p 217). “*What is new about neo-atheism...*” is a question raised by the author and in providing the answer, the author has stated that there is not much “*new*” to atheism when comparing old and new beliefs in atheism.

New atheism does not bring much new material, even though it has been contested in religious debate for millennia.

However, the missed opportunities in this instance alone are that the author does not explain in detail the exact reason why someone follows atheistic beliefs and practices. The definition of Western and Eastern atheism is vague, and the author could have expanded the definitions and rooted his arguments more firmly in religious contexts and foundations.

On the other hand, the author has defined neo-atheism and said that it is a part of this rapidly changing world, which is dominated by science, technology and globalisation. These advancements have led the young minds of the global world to question their faith and religious doctrines. The historical context and debate to support the rise of neo-atheism have been clearly stated by the author in a thought-provoking manner.

The impact of neo-atheism on Muslim communities and societies has been written but the relevance of neo-atheism could have been expanded to include its impact on other communities and societies like Christianity and Judaism, as these religions have monotheistic beliefs in a Supreme Being as well.

The author then traces the origin of Hinduism, and this reflects the thoroughness and dedication of the author to bring forth his arguments. His addition of the history of the religion helps the readers understand the religion even more, as Hinduism is a vast concept and often a complicated term for laymen to understand. The author has expressed Hinduism as ‘...*The Hindu way is not just a religious path but a complex philosophical system allowing a broad spectrum of beliefs...*’ (p 246). He argues that Hinduism does not completely reject or oppose materialistic understanding but instead combines it with spirituality in a harmonious manner. Another reason stated by the author as to why he is not an atheist is that India has a huge role to play in this instance. In this country, as the author recalls, everyone from all sectors of life and religion can

find a home and find their space. The existence of different religions in close harmony with one another encourages the author to embrace the different religious contradictions. The author then states that even though he was born a Hindu due to the religious ideologies of his parents, he remained a Hindu by his own personal choice. The identification with the Hindu religion is purely his decision as a result of the firmness and calmness associated with Hinduism. His growing age made him realise that Hinduism is not merely a religion but is more of a worldview that shows the correct path and lifestyle to individuals. The wisdom and comfort found in the verses of the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Upanishads*, along with the *Ramayana*, give him a sense of calmness and comfort, feelings and sensations that cannot be given to him by artificial machines and technologies. These factors play an important role in making the author follow the Hindu religion and abstain from being an atheist, despite the author's deep sense of intellectual engagement and connection with modern lifestyles and development.

India has a long-standing history of following a pluralistic culture wherein different religions coexist in peaceful harmony, thus adding to the notion of unity in diversity. The religious boundaries are rather fluid, and cultural practices and festival celebrations are often shared across the religious communities. Indians are often assumed to be Hindus due to the inherent pluralism and inclusivity of Hinduism, and the author has said that Hinduism absorbs and integrates the elements of various cultures and religions, which leads non-Indians to assume all Indians follow Hinduism. The religious Sufi shrines in India are visited frequently by both Hindus and Muslims, and in terms of festivals, Indians unitedly celebrate festivals with roots in Hinduism, such as Diwali, Holi, Pongal and Raksha Bandhan. These festivals unite Indians, giving them ample opportunities for family gatherings and bonding. Most religions in India are often fluid and act as a cultural system rather than functioning strictly within religious events, the result of which, as stated by the author, promotes unity amongst Indians. This leaves little chance for the progress of atheism in India.

The religious roots of Hinduism, such as yoga and meditation, are also incorporated by non-Hindus who adopt these practices as tradition-based practices, which in turn shows the fluidity of religion in India. As against the religious harmony of Indians witnessed in India, scholars like *Duile & Aldama*¹ have stated that in Western contexts, each religion strictly exhibits a stratified and articulated presence amongst their respective followers only, which leads them to follow paths which are different and often yield varied outcomes. This practice leaves wide room for the progress of atheism in Western culture, as religious harmony is close to impossible in their society. Hence, Mehra's book firmly stands with the religious harmony in India as a sole reason for atheism's low chances of progress. Aligned with the scope of Mehra's arguments, *Ahmad & Kang*,² in their book, they have also supported the constant failure of the progress of atheism in India as being due to the nationalist grounding of Indian religious frameworks and the fluidity of all Indian religions, which leaves wider room for community gatherings and interaction, keeping the idea of atheism at bay.

The book has pointed out that Hinduism is not just a religious path. It also allows a broad spectrum of beliefs as permitted by its complex philosophical system. A study by *Amarasingam*³ has also stated that the broadness of religious philosophies leaves lesser scope for deviation into an atheistic lifestyle. *Caglar*⁴ argues that intellectuality and the constant striving for passion in scientific advancements weaken faith and religiosity, which is exactly what Western societies are currently witnessing. This has led to the deterioration of their foundation in religion, which has led many people to turn to atheism. *Binder*,⁵ in his study on atheism in India, has also stated that even though less

¹ Timo Duile & Prince Aldama, *Seeing through the lens of atheism: plural societies, religion and harmony ideology in Southeast Asia*. Secularism & Nonreligion, 13 (4) (2024).

² (2022). *The Nation Form in the Global Age Ethnographic Perspectives*, edited by Irfan Ahmad & Jie Kang. Palgrave Macmillan.

³ Amarnath Amarasingam, *Religion and the new atheism*. Brill. (2010).

⁴ Mustafa E Caglar, *Why does intellectuality weaken faith and sometimes foster it?* Humanities and Social Sciences Communication, 7 (2020).

⁵ Stefan Binder (2020). *On the impossibility of atheism in secular India*. Global Diversities.

prevalent in India, atheism and atheists indeed exist in India, but their numbers are few and are largely marginalised and side-lined in academic discourse and by society in general. This is the result of society's perceptions of atheism as a product of foreign traits or Western influence. Thus, India's religions, having deep roots in nationalism, traditions and culture, offer flexibility in community engagement, which often leaves positive inculcation of positive religious doctrines in the minds of the people, thus leaving less scope for deviation into atheistic philosophies.

A missed opportunity which the author could have highlighted in his book includes the exact way the Hindu religion comforts him. He could have presented it in a step-by-step manner, instead of briefly stating it in a general manner. Religious individuals often talk about the close connection they have with God and the religion that they follow, but many do not explain the steps to follow to attain this salvation and calmness. This exact issue is found in the book as well, as the author could have expanded the steps through which one can attain calmness, which led him to attain divine intervention and divine experiences from his religion. Overall, this book adds to the richness of religious studies and can offer a strong standpoint for scholars and readers to cement their arguments on why being an atheist in today's world is irrelevant, as opposed to staying true to one's preferred religion.



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