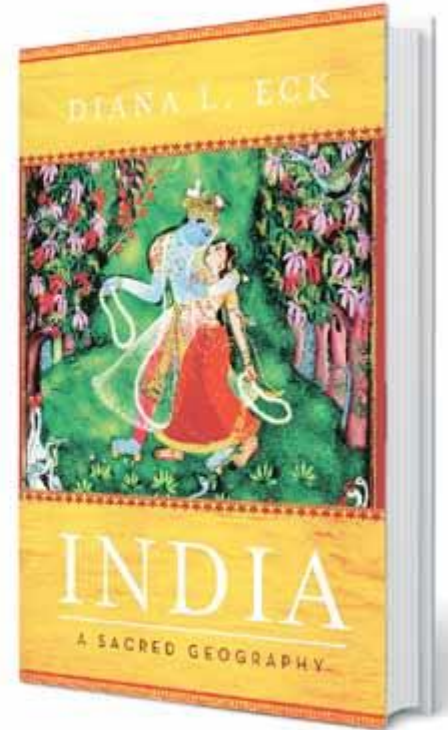


# Secularism is endemic to Indian culture: Diana L Eck (INDIAN EXPRESS)

Diana L Eck, scholar and professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University, acclaimed for her books — *India: A Sacred Geography* and *Banaras: City of Light*, talks about what pluralism means in India today and the ecological threats to India's 'sacred geography'



Diana L Eck Ganesh Shirsekar; her book cover

You've written about how pluralism is inherent in Indian culture. Have events here over the last year or two changed your belief in that?

There are occasional eruptions in India, and I think this is one of those periods. But there is a kind of low-key everyday pluralism of India that Ashis Nandy talked about, and I believe that it can't be touched. Hindu nationalism, the way it is articulated sometimes, can be destructive. Yet

over the long course of Indian history, that sort of chauvinism has never won. India's pluralism is different from the United States. Pluralism and secularism go together. By secularism, I don't mean 'non-religious', but rather the equal treatment of and regard for all religions. That's endemic to Indian culture. It's also an important leadership issue, for example, when someone like Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) acknowledges, like he did in his speech in Vadodara, that once you are elected to office, you are serving all the people and not just a narrow group of them. We have many chauvinistic voices in the US as well and some of them are running for president. Do you see a rising tide of Hinduism with the progressive opening up here?

That depends on what you think the rising tide of Hinduism means. If it means the political uses of Hinduism and Hindu nationalism, then yes, I can see that. But I doubt that it is very widespread. I've also studied pilgrimage and the participation in ritual Hinduism has gone up. Many more people are going to the Kumbh Mela or to Sabarimala. Maybe it's because transport is better or that people can afford to travel now.

What changes have you observed here especially over the last few years in terms of religious diversity?

India has always had diversity, and it continues to exist. For example, in a place like Varanasi, where I studied all the Hindu shrines, I didn't know that there is a whole range of Muslim shrines as well. In India, diversity has also come to include secular people who don't have much to do with their religious traditions. Many of them are deeply involved in what I would call the 'kar seva' of the NGOs.

There's been a lot of talk of reviving the Ganga. What are your observations of the river's ecosystem?

Recently, we spent 10 days on the river, on a cruise boat. One thing you don't get in the lower reaches of the Ganga is a sense of the enormous pollution that is going on. In most of the towns and big cities, 80 per cent of the waste product goes into the river, so there is a lot of raw sewage. The fact that the river doesn't flow fast enough in these places to refresh itself is a serious concern, as well as the fact that it contains many non-biodegradable, chemical pollutants.

What are your thoughts on the ongoing movement to allow women into Sabarimala?

As a westerner, there are a lot of temples that I have not been able to go into. But I am sympathetic to the idea of men and women having equal access to the temples. I read somewhere

that if women are allowed into Sabarimala, it would disturb the deity. I don't believe that at all. But if women themselves want to observe a sense of ritual cleanliness, then it's a question of their faith. My main concern about Sabarimala is that it has become such an incredibly popular pilgrimage that it literally tramples the forests and streams in that part of Kerala. There are efforts to keep pilgrims from discarding their plastic waste in the forest. This is one place where pilgrimage and the green movement are at loggerheads.

You've done work on the multiculturalism in the US, particularly through the Pluralism Project. How has it turned out over the years?

It's gradually being accepted as one of the richest things about the US. Diversity is part of our strength. But there are still people who don't know who these 'other' people are. Gradually, they are learning. Much of Islamophobia is manufactured. There is a report by the Center for American Progress called 'Fear, Inc.', which talks about fear of the other being a business, funded by a small group of people. Only a very small number of people are Islamophobes and I think, politically, it will be roundly defeated.

Varanasi is a place you visit every time you're in India. What were your first impressions of the city?

I first saw Varanasi in 1965, when I was a student. I remember it as being much more beautiful. All the ghats were just beautiful sandstone, with only their names written on them. Today, there's no regulation, and the beauty of the ghats is marred by the many signs painted on them. Now, of course, with the growing population, the issue of pollution has become critical.

Diana L Eck will be delivering the Vasant J Sheth Memorial Lecture on 'Sacred Rivers: the Lifelines of India' today at 7 pm at Coomaraswamy Hall, CSMVS, Mumbai