

## **Religion on the Road in Secular India: Production of Liminality, Hostility and Hospitality in Public Places**

James Ponniah<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Though India is a secular country, Indian secularism, unlike its European version, is neither anti-religion nor religion-neutral. Rather it believes in the equal treatment of all religions and accommodates the religious interests of all faith traditions. While this policy of accommodation produces a public display of religion on the roads and the public places, it transforms the road into a site of contradictory and ambivalent behaviours. On the one hand, the religious festival of Vinayaka Chaturthi which culminates in the procession of Ganesh idols in cars with much decor and the immersion of them in different beaches in Chennai not only facilitates the enactment of Hindu religious matters in public places; such events sponsored by Sangh Parivar outfits also provide new occasions for Hindutva religious identity politics. Pro-Hindu slogans and anti-Muslim propaganda such as ‘Hindus Unite: Boycott the Shops of Terrorist Funders’ written on huge flex boards that adorn the procession cars turn Indian roads into a political arena in which majoritarian political forces mobilise the sentiments of Hindu nationalism through a hate campaign and the strategy of hostility toward the Muslim minority. On the other hand, the religious phenomena of walking pilgrimages that take place in the roads of Chennai turn Chennai roads into site of hospitality. The citizens of Chennai irrespective of religious affiliations provide water, food, butter milk, biscuits etc. to the pilgrims who go on foot to shrines such Vailankannie Church or Melmaruvathur Adi Parashakti temple. On important dates of the pilgrimages such as August 29<sup>th</sup>, the traffic on certain key roads is suspended and the vehicle-routes are diverted to felicitate the walking pilgrimage of hundreds and thousands of devotees. While both the events cited above indicate the state’s policy of religious accommodation, it equally helps to unravel the soft power of religion to turn public places into liminal spaces in which the normal activities of the traffic and other behaviours are suspended in deference to a religious event. The paper argues that production of such liminality on the road can result in the transformation roads into a site of both hostility and hospitality.

**Key Words:** *Indian Secularism, Religious Processions, Pilgrimages, Hostility and Hospitality*

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Christian Studies, School of Philosophy and Religious Thought, University of Madras, Chepauk, Chennai  
jamesponniah@gmail.com