

Review Article

Religion, Politics and Collective Identities in India *

SHALINI RANDERIA

This century, which began with great optimism about ideas of universalism and humanism, is drawing to a close with a triumph of difference, fragmentation, and nationalism. Religion has played an important role in these processes, not least in the re-definition of national identities in societies as different as the United States, Poland, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, India, Israel and Algeria. Debates about secularism too have recently characterised the political cultures of eastern and western Europe as much as of South Asia. Not surprisingly, therefore, the recent electoral success of religious nationalism in India has been accompanied by a growing scholarly interest in Hinduism, though the two have followed opposite trajectories. The attractiveness of Hindu nationalist politics is partly predicated on its propagation of a homogeneous 'Hinduism' as the religion of the 'majority' of Indians from time immemorial, a conception based largely on earlier Western scholarship. In contradistinction, recent historical and indological studies emphasize the plurality and heterogeneity of Hindu traditions, especially the fact that the term 'Hindu', as a marker of collective self-identity, and 'Hinduism' are hardly two hundred years old. The books under review here bring together contributions by historians, indologists, political scientists, sociologists and scholars of Indian law which explicitly challenge the Hindu Right's attempt to reinterpret history, refashion religion and undermine secularism on the subcontinent.

* Vasudha Dalmia/Heinrich von Stietencron (eds.), *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999 (second edition). 467 pages. ISBN 81-7036-423-X (Pb). (1st edition 1995)

Rajeev Bhargava (ed.), *Secularism and its Critics*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998. 550 pages. ISBN: 0-19-563987-1

Kaushik Basu/Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.), *Unravelling the Nation: Sectarian Conflict and India's Secular Identity*. New Delhi: Penguin Books. 1996. 244 pages. ISBN 0-14-025758-6

Tanika Sarkar/Urvashi Butalia (eds.), *Women and Right-wing Movements: Indian Experiences*. London: Zed Books. 1995. 342 pages. ISBN 1-85649-290-0

The excellent collection edited by Dalmia and Stietencron focuses on the complex processes of reformulation of Hinduism over the last two centuries in response to orientalist scholarship, missionary critiques, colonial rule and the political imperatives of imagining a nation. The first three sections of the book analyze the historical transformation of Hinduism into a uniform and unified religion from a self-consciously pluralistic and syncretic ethos in which a diversity of traditions coexisted with one another and intermingled with Islamic ones. Several essays explore the creativity of the varied Indian responses to Western hegemony and the paradox that while challenging European claims to superiority, Indians came increasingly to represent and to refashion their society and culture in accordance with Western ideas, images and institutions. The final section on performing arts is largely irrelevant to the overall argument of the book and is not reviewed here.

Gita Dharampal-Frick makes imaginative use of early modern European sources to contrast the 19th and 20th century Brahmanic and orientalist perceptions of a single, rigid and closed model of Indian society, based on the religious system of caste as the defining pan-Indian institution, with pre-colonial accounts. Written by European missionaries, travellers and cosmographers between 1500-1800 these are constrained neither by the imperatives of colonial rule nor scientific frameworks like evolutionism. Unfortunately, the author does not consider the possibility that some of the characteristics, seen today as the 'traditional' defining features of the caste system (e.g. the pre-eminence of Brahmins, rigid occupational specialization), were in fact of colonial origin. 19th and 20th century representations of caste could then be seen to reflect not merely discursive shifts but also historical changes under colonialism.

In a provocative piece challenging the existence of a homogeneous 'Hinduism' in pre-modern India, Heinrich von Stietencron posits that Vaishnavism and Shaivism, instead of being seen as 'sects' within 'Hinduism', were conceived of as independent religions with sharp theological distinctions, competitive claims of superior access to divine grace and conversion rituals. The 11th century text examined by him draws religious boundaries very differently from contemporary ones by treating Buddhism and Jainism (seen as separate religions today) in the same terms as Vaishnavism and Vedanta (classified today as a 'Hindu' sect and 'philosophical' system respectively). He argues that in the absence of an institutional structure with the authority to integrate and centralize these diverse traditions, tolerance of religious plurality on the subcontinent continued well into the 19th century, a thesis which may need to be qualified in the light of Sanjay Subrahmanyam's analysis of medieval sectarian conflicts in the volume edited by him reviewed below.

Ironically, over the last two centuries British administrative practice, missionary influence and the urban middle classes' imagination of a 'nation' on the European model, grounded in a common culture and a single religion, came to mould Hindu self-perception in the direction of a homogeneity foreign to religious and social traditions in India. Friedhelm Hardy attributes to Western indology much of the responsibility for this monolithic, essentialist and ahistorical understanding of 'Hinduism'. As against the usual unilinear teleological interpretation of religious history in medieval India, which privileges the tendencies integrating diverse local or regional traditions into a unified pan-Indian system, he shows the significance of powerful centrifugal trends working towards vernacularization, regional differentiation and greater inclusion of the lower castes. Günther Sontheimer analyzes just such a regional cult in western India today which interweaves the devotional self-surrender of Bhakti movements with fertility rituals, possession, ritualized competition and animal sacrifice. Whereas traditional brahmanical opposition to such practices took the form of assigning them an inferior status, missionaries and modern Hindu reformers sought to exclude them from the very sphere of 'religion' by condemning them as 'superstition'. The contemporary urban middle class drive to homogenize Hinduism and sanitize it in accordance with modern sensibilities, is likely to further marginalize these cults. Such a process is not without historical precedence as Jürgen Lütt's discussion of the impact of the highly negative publicity in the Maharaj libel case involving an important Krishna cult towards the end of the 19th century demonstrates. Seminal to its modern reformulation, purging the cult of all erotic, sensual mysticism, were the efforts of Hindu social and religious reformers who used both British courts and newspapers to mobilize public opinion against traditional religious authority and practices.

However, Sudhir Chandra's fascinating analysis of another controversial court case in the 1880s interrogates such a dichotomy between 'tradition' and 'modernity' compelling one to rethink many aspects of the meta-narrative of modernization of Indian society and law under colonial rule. His exposition of the ambivalences and paradoxes of the discourses on 'tradition' shows that the lines between 'orthodox' and 'reformist' Hindus were much more blurred than the conventional view of the former as conservatives and the latter as liberal modernizers of tradition. But this reviewer has mixed feelings about the argument on the relative merits of pre-colonial and colonial law. It is one thing to question the emancipatory role of the British legal system in India but quite another to valorize pre-colonial socio-legal institutions and 'customary' laws under the jurisdiction of autonomous caste councils. It is also debatable from the point of view of gender justice whether the replacement of community-based multiple norms and practices by a unified legal code administered by the state is as retrograde a step as Chandra suggests.

As Dieter Conrad's tour de force in modern Indian legal history shows, the crux of the problem lies instead in the application of separate family laws for members of different communities defined by religion. Questioning the constitutional validity of many of these provisions in a secular state, he advocates the possibility of individual preference (instead of an automatic application) for one of the religious personal laws parallel to the introduction of a common civil code for all citizens, a solution favoured by a section of the Indian women's movement too. Conrad's essay is full of new insights into the entangled histories of the British invention of 'Hindu law', its homogenization at the expense of regional and caste-based diversity and the erasure of shared traditions with Muslim communities as well as into the use of law as a medium of integration and of political self-assertion by leaders of both the Hindu and the Muslim communities.

Examining the transformation of Indian historiography in the 19th century, Partha Chatterjee points out that this nationalist conception of history, which the Hindu Right also shares, is neither traditional nor religious but entirely modern and secular in its origin and logic. Its division of Indian history into a classical period of Hindu glory, medieval (Muslim) degeneration and modern (Christian) renaissance is borrowed from European historiography. So is the idea of the singularity of a shared 'national history' derived from a single source in religious tradition (ancient Hindu civilisation), which excludes the historical legacy of Islam as 'foreign' to the sub-continent. Gyanendra Pandey's analysis of popular vernacular Hindu 'histories' shows that despite their use of a modern discourse of 'majority' and 'minority' as well as of 'cultural rights', these texts present recent political conflicts as if they were repetitions of centuries of traditional animosity between Hindus and Muslims. In the only article in the volume dealing with Muslim communal consciousness, Javed Alam argues that this fragile synthesis of Hindu and Islamic traditions in everyday life is unable to withstand interventions by the religious orthodoxy and the political elite seeking to integrate the Muslims as a distinct and exclusive cultural community. However, Muslim communal organisations have in the last few decades redefined this religious identity in terms of secular provisions like education, employment opportunities, health services, housing and neighbourhood protection which the post-colonial state has failed to deliver to the minorities and the poor in India.

However, the patterns of Muslim communal formations must be understood not only with reference to state policies but also with regard to the diversity of Hindu responses to Western challenges with which the following six essays are concerned. Using literary and historical sources, Vasudha Dalmia sensitively explores the complex interaction among missionary, orientalist, 'neo-Hindu' and orthodox readings of Hinduism in the 19th cen-

ture. Her analysis of the strategies used by the Vaishnavas in north India to establish their pre-eminence, and to reconstitute this strand of Hinduism theologically as well as organisationally, highlights the contribution of intellectuals to this process along with the surprising role of western indology in providing legitimation for the Vaishnava claim to be 'the only true monotheist religion in India'.

Wilhelm Halbfass details the incorporation of Schopenhauer's and Deussen's ethical interpretations of Buddhism and Vedanta into Vivekananda's reformulation of modern Hinduism, defending it against charges of hybridity and inauthenticity levelled by Paul Hacker, a leading German indologist. Both chapters convey well the sense of being in a hall of mirrors, in their analyses of Western critiques of Indian reflections of Western images of the 'real Hinduism' and are interesting exercises that go beyond Edward Said's original Orientalism thesis. Monika Horstmann too examines the construction of Hinduism as a universal religion in the service of nationalism in the tracts of the Gita Press which are highly popular in India and among Indians abroad. It is unfortunate that none of the collections reviewed here includes a study of the reconfigurations of Hinduism among diaspora communities in Europe and North America and their interaction with political Hinduism in India.

Mahatma Gandhi's radical critique of European modernity as based on the exploitation of nature, and the subjugation of other parts of the world and other ways of life, has been at the centre of many recent intellectual debates on modernity in India. Suresh Sharma reads Gandhi's 'Hind Swaraj' (1909) as a self-conscious reaffirmation of the superiority of traditional values and institutions as better suited to India, especially for the purpose of reforming society and religion. Questioning the universalization of the modern European concept of history, Gandhi's lesser known contemporary, Bhudev Mukhopadhyaya is equally critical of British historians' use of history to divide the people of India. Both also reject colonial attempts to restructure Indian society in accordance with European principles in order to bring all areas of social life under the control of the state, which had traditionally been marginal to social life on the sub-continent. Through his insightful reading of Bhudev's ideas for a sociology of India, Sudipto Kaviraj shows that such a project, advocating the use of indigenous concepts and frameworks as an alternative to Western theories of utilitarianism and positivism, would amount to a Hindu sociology of European modernity, an interesting inversion of the Weberian project.

The collection of fourteen essays edited by Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia is to be highly welcomed as the first volume to situate gender ideology and women's agency within the larger framework of the organisational history of Hindu right wing politics, exploring its relationship to changing

economic developments, caste politics and constitutional crises over the last few decades. Leading scholars and activists of the Indian women's movement seek here to understand the recent success of women's organisations within the Hindu Right but leave unanswered many questions about the motivation and experiences of ordinary women who have been mobilised in large numbers by these organisations. Sikata Banerjee and Teesta Setalvad argue that one reason for the success of the Shiv Sena in Bombay, for example, is that they have managed to build a sense of community by providing solutions to women's problems in daily life, organising neighbourhood help and creating a socially acceptable space for women to be active outside the home. Flavia Agnes attributes their success to their appropriation of issues and strategies from the autonomous women's movement, whereas Tanika Sarker cautions against dismissing the gender ideology of Hindu nationalism as unquestionably fundamentalist despite its overarching conservatism. Comparing the active involvement of women in right wing racist movements in Germany and France with their participation in the 'Hindutva' movement, Amrita Basu asks whether and how it has also led to the empowerment of these women. Vasanth and Kalpana Kannabiran show how processes of modernization promote those of sectarian organization as women are expected to provide a comforting sense of community and continuity in the face of anxiety and alienation, an argument made more generally by Sudhir Kakar in the Basu/Subrahmanyam volume under review below to explain the current popularity of the 'Hindutva' ideology.

In its agenda of retribution for alleged historical wrongs, the militant right has continually manipulated the issue of mass rape and abduction of women during the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. In the interviews contained in the last chapter, women office bearers of Hindu nationalist organizations assert the duty of Hindu men to rape Muslim women as a form of revenge. Urvashi Butalia examines how violence against women is used in these discourses to constitute the identity of Hindu and Muslim men as well as women. For recent violence against members of the Muslim community has been justified with reference to the images of Hindu women raped in 1947, the defilement of their bodies representing metaphorically the violated body of the nation. But rape as a political act is also legitimized as a means of impregnation with the seed of a 'superior' race just as young Muslim men and women are singled out for killing so that they do not reproduce. There are striking parallels here to the Balkans and Ruanda. But the fear of losing the demographic race to Muslims is a recurring theme in militant right wing rhetoric all over western Europe as well.

The distortion of data on inter-religious fertility differentials and the manipulation of migration statistics is the subject of Alaka Basu's contribution to the rather eclectic but interesting volume of six essays edited by

Kaushik Basu and Sanjay Subrahmanyam on nationalism and sectarianism (a term they prefer to 'communalism' in view of its broader comparative usage) in India.

Whereas G. Balanchandran emphasizes the role of sectarian organisations and issues in the very formation of nationalism in India, Sudhir Kakar prefers a psychological explanation. Moving away from a utilitarian and instrumentalist thesis in terms of political strategies and rational interests, he focuses on fantasies, myths and symbols from the past which are pivotal in the construction of a Hindu collective memory and the search for a cultural identity. The appeal of the 'Hindutva' movement for the emerging middle classes lies precisely in its reformulation of the project of modernity, adopting its instrumentalities (technology, market economy) while rejecting its norms and values as detrimental to Hindu culture and identity, a contradictory, perhaps pathological, response. Veena Das, who in the Dalmia/Stietencron volume examines militant identity formation in a minority community - the Sikhs - deals in her contribution to this volume with anti-Sikh riots in Delhi following the murder of Mrs. Gandhi by two of her Sikh bodyguards. A highly differentiated picture of the violence emerges in her nuanced analysis, which unravels the heterogeneity of social action and the multiplicity of meanings attached to it by a variety of actors, as local dynamics render complex what is usually understood to be a uniform phenomenon - 'a communal riot' - irrespective of context.

Sectarian violence and its interface with the state is also the theme of Sanjay Subrahmanyam's important contribution which delineates the logic of medieval violence (between Shaiva and Vaishnava sects, between them and Jain or Buddhist orders) that preceded and then ran concurrent with conflicts after the impact of Islam on South Asia. It thus gives the lie to the accounts of 'Hindutva' ideologues and historians who proclaim the inherent tolerance and harmony of Hinduism as against a violent and aggressive Islam. But more provocatively, it also challenges the conventional wisdom of nationalist, liberal and left historiography which either denies inter-religious violence in pre-colonial India (seen purely as a result of colonial policies of 'divide and rule') or seeks to interpret it as a clash of material interests without religious significance. By examining a variety of medieval sources with different modes and forms of history-writing in pre-colonial India, Subrahmanyam also challenges the claim made by many of the historians of the Subaltern Studies group (some of whom are contributors to the Dalmia/Stietencron volume) that history writing and historical consciousness are of colonial origin in India, being modern products of the European Enlightenment, whereas the past in India was approached indigenously through other genres.

Amartya Sen's spirited defence and redefinition of secularism in India as requiring a symmetry of treatment of different religions and communities rather than dissociation between state and religion(s), is explicitly addressed to readers unfamiliar with matters Indian. But it is also intended as an intervention in the recent Indian debate in which intellectuals like Ashis Nandy and T.N. Madan have attacked secularism for its failure to check fanaticism and sectarian strife and have advocated its replacement by recovering the spirit of tolerance inherent in pre-colonial religious traditions.

The collection edited by Rajeev Bhargava reprints not only the essay by Sen but also those of Nandy and Madan along with earlier seminal writings on secularism by D.E. Smith and Marc Galanter. Moreover, it contains most of the other significant contributions to the ongoing debate on secularism in India which is extremely well analysed by the editor in his substantive introduction to the book. Important as a reference work, which makes all these articles scattered in various journals easily available, the main merit of the volume lies in the inclusion of chapters by Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel and Jean Bauberot among others, providing both a comparative Western perspective on secularism and raising more general questions of political philosophy arising from the Indian debate.

Michael Sandel's discussion of the separation of religion and politics thesis draws attention to the fact that it means different things in the USA, France, Germany or Britain (and has been interpreted differently at different times in each country), while T. N. Scanlon shows that each of these countries has worked out a particular political compromise rather than implementing a solution uniquely required by the values embodied in secularism as a principle. As Bhargava rightly argues, Indian debates would benefit from a recognition of this contestation and diversity of secularisms in the West, just as Western discussions of group rights, multiculturalism, affirmative action and differentiated citizenship would profit from a consideration of the Indian experience.

Marc Galanter shows that Smith's critique of the Indian practice of secularism is unconvincing as it measures the reality of the Indian state's interference in religious matters (which is well documented in Partha Chatterjee's article) against an idealized view of the neutrality of the American state. For Galanter the uniqueness of the Indian solution seeking to accommodate both religious liberty and progress is not a deficient departure from the Western norm but an attempt to reinvent secularism divergent from its Western trajectories.

As against this view Madan and Nandy reject secularism as a principle foreign to Indian cultures and traditions, one which has exacerbated the very problems it was designed to solve. Both insist on the public nature of

religion in India and the impossibility, and even undesirability, of relegating it to the private sphere. At the heart of Nandy's influential thesis lies the distinction between 'religion-as-faith' (as a way of life, tolerant and plural) and 'religion-as-ideology' (as a means to promote political and economic interests). The latter, along with the nation-state framework in which it operates, is posited as a product of modernization. According to Nandy, it deepens alienation and breeds violence which can only be countered by a return to ideas of toleration available in the religious traditions of the subcontinent. Critical of Nandy's traditionalist nostalgia and uncritical anti-nationalism, Akeel Bilgrami, like Sen, questions this equation of the evils of secularism with those of modernity. Instead, his nuanced analysis locates the problem in the flawed political processes through which secularism in India came to be imposed from above, rather than emerging from below through a dialogue among and within different communities. Stanley Tambiah's objection to Nandy's dichotomy is concerned with its failure to account for the experiences and motivations of those ordinary believers, assumed to be traditionally peaceful and tolerant, who suddenly participate *en masse* in violent campaigns led by the Hindu Right. In view of the dangers posed by these militant movements with fascist tendencies, Bhargava rightly insists in his concluding piece on the imperative to reinvent secularism as a transcultural ideal rather than seeking alternatives to it.

All four volumes are highly recommended to all scholars of South Asia. Those edited by Dalmia/Stietencron and Bhargava will prove equally valuable for all interested in questions of religious nationalism, secularism, contestations about history and collective memory, formation of national identities and cultures, trajectories of modernity in non-European societies and (re)constitution of traditions under colonialism and in a post-colonial world.

AGAINST CHILD LABOUR

Indian and International Dimensions

Edited by Klaus Voll

376 pp Hardcover 140 × 215 mm 81-85399-47-6 US\$ 35

The aim of this book is to intensify the international and Indian debate on this subject, and to provide practical steps and strategies for the elimination of child labour. The book contains a range of sometimes conflicting views (based on theoretical considerations and practical experience) about the required concepts and strategies. It attempts to deepen the debate and to spell out practical steps for use by organizations in the field.

To Obtain Copies: Please send your orders to Mosaic Books accompanied by cheque/draft for US\$ 35 per copy. Copies would be sent by registered air-mail, postage free.

Mosaic Books

B-17, 2nd Floor, Lajpat Nagar Part 2, New Delhi 110024

Telefax: 91-11-6823869; Tel: 91-11-6918517, 6846071

E-mail: israel4@vsnl.com