

Book Reviews

Globalisation, Hindu Nationalism and Christians in India. Lancy Lobo. Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications. 2002. pp. 240. Rs. 450.

The last twenty years or so have been very critical in the contemporary history of India. Indian economy, politics and society have seen many new processes and trends emerging during this period. Globalization and Hindu nationalism are two such important new phenomena that made their presence felt on the Indian scene during this period, more or less, simultaneously. Though it was during the Congress rule in 1991 that the policy of liberalization designed to “open” Indian to the inflow of global capital and cultural commodities was initiated, the process consolidated itself during the BJP led regime. Hindutva politics too began to gain ascendancy around the same time. Though the two appear to be very different, in fact contradictory, processes, there seems to be some association between the two. The relationship between Hindu nationalism and globalization is more than a mere “elective affinity”, to use a term from Max Weber’s sociology. Sociologically speaking, they both represent the aspiration of a common social category, the upwardly mobile Hindu upper castes and middle classes.

Contributions between globalization and Hindu nationalism are rather obvious. In a world dominated by US led capitalism, globalization would not only integrate Indian economy into the global market but would also inevitably bring with it Western values/culture, leading to some kind of cultural homogenization at the global level. The cultural agenda of Hindu nationalism on the other hand is openly sectarian. While it wants cultural homogenization at the national level, in relation to the outside world it presents itself as a movement against “external” influences, economic or cultural.

While the Indian economists have already generated a good amount of literature on the political economy of such globalization, and similarly sociologists and political scientists have commented on various dimensions of Hindutva politics, the twin processes have rarely been analyzed together. It is here that Lobo’s book stands out for the novelty of its theme. Though the primary focus of Lobo’s book is to look at the growing incidents of violence against members of Christian communities in the context of the twin processes, he also makes some useful general comments that help us understand the broader processes of change taking place in the Indian society.

Despite the obvious contradictions, Lobo argues that the twin processes feed into each other. Globalization creates a certain cultural homogenization of the world expressed most clearly in the icons of consumption. Such a cultural invasion from outside invariably produce a reaction and anxiety, which gives boost to religious fundamentalist forces. It helps in creating ‘a space for the binary opposites’.

It is not only the process of globalization that threatens the upper castes and the traditionally dominant, the processes of democratization and development that have helped the erstwhile poor and marginal also threaten them Christian missionaries through their work among tribals and other depressed sections of the Indian society have directly participated in this process of empowering Tribals and Dalits. The upward social and economic mobility has made the tribals aware of their ‘rights’. They are no longer willing to ‘be hoodwinked, cheated or alienated from their lands as easily as before’. The only way to beat the missionaries was by using the *conversion stick*. Those erstwhile dominant sections of the Indian society use the anxiety generated by the process of globalization and mobilize religious sentiments against minorities in order to reinforce their domination.

While the dominant Hindutva forces attack Christian missionaries, they are not willing to reform Hinduism. In fact, Lobo asserts that in most cases those among the tribals and dalits who have moved to Christianity have done so not merely because of the lure of the missionary but also due to the push of the hierarchical structure of Hindu society. In its given social structure, it was difficult for Hindu society to integrate tribals. For example, what position will they be assigned in the traditional caste order?

The Hindu moral and social order is not the only thing that Lobo is critical of. He also takes on the Christian Church and develops an extensive critique of their apolitical approach. Christian activists need to identify their enemies and friends. They can no longer avoid politics. They ought to align with other minority groups, such as Muslims and Sikhs who have similarly been target of attack. Similarly, they also need to identify with the politics of lower castes. The Christian Churches should also review critically the predominantly middle class orientation of their educational activities. The urban middle classes send their children to convent schools run by the Churches not because of they want their children to learn Christian values that are taught in these schools but solely because of the quality of their teaching, particularly the English language, which helps them make successful careers.

Lobo is also critical of the paternalistic attitude of the Christian Churches towards the poor. Church activists, according to Lobo, need to get out of this paternalistic model and move to ‘a participatory approach’ where individuals and communities are made to get involved as equal partners in the processes of deciding about what is food for them. Such an approach is empowering, democratic and inclusive. Making people participate also requires sensitivity to local cultures. Most importantly such an approach will go a long way in strengthening democracy at the grass root level. The chances of extremist ideologies, such as Hindutva, gaining foothold in a democratic setting are much lesser than they are in a hierarchically divided and unjust society.

Lobo’s book is not a conventional sociological study of the processes of globalization or the rise of Hindutva politics. He is not interested in identifying socio-economic or psycho-cultural factors that have given spurt to such a politics in contemporary India. His is a passionate argument and appeal against the Hindutva politics/ideology and west-centric globalization. Lobo is asking for building a broad political alliance among the minority communities and Dalits against majoritarian Hindutva politics. The Christians can participate in such an alliance better if they changed their own perspective of working among the weak and poor.

Surinder S. Jodhka

Social Action, Vol. 53, July – September 2003