

Book Reviews

Globalization and Cultural Nationalism

Globalization, Hindu Nationalism and Christians in India, by Lancy Lobo; Rawat Publications, Jaipur and Delhi, 2002; pp 240, Rs. 450.

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This book represents the response of a Christian to the atrocities perpetuated by the Hindutvawadis, especially on Christians, and particularly in Gujarat. The "basic assumption" (p 38), or rather thesis, of this study is that the 'manthan' that has begun in India with independence and the mobilization of the subaltern classes that has resulted could no longer be contained with the old Congress model or the Nehruvian consensus. The first was defeated at the hustings, and consequently, the second lost the support of the dominant groups that had held it together. The articulation of Hindu nationalism spelt out in terms of cultural nationalism and religious fundamentalism, is, in fact, a response by some of these dominant groups to once again re-establish the brahmanic order of caste/crass dominance, and to co-opt the subaltern groups once again into their subordinate place in the old hierarchy. Globalisation has accelerated this process and as a result accentuated the inherent contradictions and dilemmas.

The author attempts an exposure of strategy and tactics of these Hindutvawadis. These "Hindu nationalists as seen in this study have two pseudo elements: pseudo- Hindu and pseudo-patriotic" ones at that (p 171). The anti-Mandal riots are but another example of this attempt to put the OBCs in their place. And the most prominent strategy has been scapegoating by targeting the minorities. First, it was the Muslims, and when this seemed to have reached the point of diminishing returns, especially electoral ones, it is now the turn of the Christians. But of course, there is no saying who the next minority targeted will be, or whether there will be a reversal to the old familiar one as it has happened once again in Gujarat. Gujarat is clearly the laboratory of the Hindutva experiment; we can see it run riot and cause the kind of national embarrassment where the prime minister and deputy prime minister apologise abroad, while they defend their minions at home. Will this be the beginning of the reversal of at least the worst trends that seem to be inexorably moving to their logical conclusion? The ambiguities are only now coming to the fore, as one can see in the contradictions between the nationalist BJP at the centre as represented by the prime minister and the Gujarati 'asmita' as propagandised by the state's chief minister. The author adopts a rather polemic tone. This may well just encourage the Hindutvawadis to respond in kind. It might precipitate a debate, but it is unlikely to

resolve the controversies involved. For such issues of religious ideology and cultural nationalism are hardly resolved by any rational appeal to facts. However, to the author's credit he does move forward to a critique to suggest a Christian response that deserves serious consideration. For in the end it is only such self-criticism that can really bring about some sort of reconciliation, if not with the extremists who have a vested interest in the communal violence, then at least with the vast majority of citizens who certainly are misinformed and manipulated into the kind of no-win situation that finally only benefits their fundamentalist leaders whatever hue they may be. The author is at pains to elaborate the strategy and tactics of the Hindutva forces (p 80). Five judicial commissions have painstakingly exposed the role of the RSS in various communal riots: Ahmedabad 1969, Bhivandi 1970, Tellicheri 1971, Jamshedpur 1979, Kanyakumari 1982, Mumbai 1992-93 (p 63). The immediate short-term response is obviously to take what protection can be had from media exposure and judicial restraint, since it is now quite evident that the government and police either stand by or are themselves participants in the riots. Gujarat is only the most recent and worst case scenario of this trend. The author does suggest a long-term response, which is basically to promote inter-cultural communication and a gradual transition from patriarchal to participative religious organisations. This, of course, is not just for Christians but in fact can be used by all the religious communities concerned. But perhaps the connection between the two needs to be more clearly established, for in actuality inter-cultural and inter-religious communication and dialogue are, only possible when it is preceded by an intra-cultural critique and open intra-religious conversation. This is the only way to stop the manipulations of culturally innocent and religiously naive people by political ideologues in the name of religion, who actually end up defiling it. The author does well to establish the kind of contradictions and constraints that globalisation has accelerated in the changing social and developmental processes prevailing in this country, and to underline the response of religious fundamentalism and cultural nationalism as one effort by dominant groups to maintain their hegemony. To this reviewer's mind, nowhere perhaps is the contradiction as clearly expressed, as between, on the one hand, the national BJP trying desperately to go global with its economic liberalisation and foreign policy pretensions to global power, using its NRI base to promote its cause, and on the other hand, the very indigenous brahmanical RSS scheming to be truly local in co-opting the dalits and tribals, and in sponsoring a Swadeshi Jagran Manch that is as far from Gandhi's swaraj - the inspiration of our freedom movement - as RSS militancy is from our bhakti-sufi tradition that has so enriched this land. The basic thesis of the book is sound, and while it is rather polemical it can certainly be developed further in a more

dialogic direction, not, of course, with a view to engaging the dogmatists or fundamentalists on either side, but rather to reach out to the vast pool of goodwill that certainly encompasses the majority of our citizens. However, there are some points that this reviewer would contest. Thus in referring to the Aryan conquest, the author seems to assume an invasion theory that is now questioned from many sides.

A gradual migration theory of Aryan occupation is now more generally accepted, which rejects a continuity, or certainly at least an identity, between the Harappan civilization and the Vedic one, such as the dubious studies inspired by Hindutva compulsions attempt. Further, in putting the Shiv Sena as part of the Sangh Parivar, the author seems to show a lack of familiarity with the kinds of tensions Maharashtra that every now and then come to the fore between the Shiv Sena and the BJP, which are not exactly like quarrels in the same family. The RSS is the inspiration of the entire Sangh Parivar, but the Shiv Sena pramuch certainly does not take any instructions from the RSS sarasanghchalak. Furthermore, in speaking of religion as a “primordial tie and a defining feature of one’s cultural identity” (p 166), the author is assuming an atavistic basis and an ascribed rather than a voluntary grounding for religion. This need to be radically questions. Religion is much more a matter of world view within which culture develops giving identity, rather than any kind of ascriptive status or predestination to the karma-dharma of one’s birth. There are some details that need to be put right. Certainly it is very annoying to find in any work with scholarly pretensions that reference are inadequately given. This does not allow a proper verification, and leaves the authenticity open to question. There are several authors quoted in the text but no complete bibliographical details are given and footnotes are conspicuous by their absence. There are some misprints that have escaped the proof-reader’s eye and ought to be corrected in a later edition, if there is one. But the book is tightly argued and well worth studying, though as all too often happens in such cases, it is more likely to be read by the already converted than by those in need of a change of heart.

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