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Review of Religious Division and Social Conflict

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Review of Peggy Froerer, *Religious Division and Social Conflict: The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in Rural India*. New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2007.

Since the 1990s, violence against Christians in India has been on the increase. Details of the larger, more destructive events, like the riots in Dangs, Gujarat (1998) and Kandhamal, Orissa (2007–2008) are relatively well known. Less well known, however, are the smaller-scale, isolated incidents of intimidation, vandalism, and violence to life and limb endured by the Indian Christian community on a relatively regular basis. Peggy Froerer's *Religious Division and Social Conflict* is neither a defense of the Indian Christian community, nor a lament for its sufferings. Rather, it is a fair and thoughtful attempt, based on nearly two years of fieldwork in a relatively peaceful Chhattisgarhi village Froerer calls Mohanpur, to show how socioeconomic competition came to be transformed, over time, into intercommunal conflict between the village's Hindu and Christian communities. This transformation, Froerer claims, had much to do with the increasing influence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), but also with the efforts of local Christian leaders to distinguish "Christian" beliefs and practices from local "superstition."

In rich detail, Froerer describes the ways that RSS *pracāra*s, arriving regularly from the city on motorbikes, promulgated their *hindutva*-inflected worldview in Mohanpur. For example, in addition to holding regular educational meetings, they attempted to inculcate a sense of broader Hindu loyalty among the villagers (many of whom were from Scheduled Tribe communities) by introducing all-India festivals such as Mahāśivrātri and thereby Sanskritizing what they considered the village's "*jaṅglī*" (jungly, backward) Hinduism. Their methods were not unlike that of the Catholic fathers who periodically visited the migrant *ādivāsī* (Oraon) Christians in Mohanpur for the purpose of disciplining them into proper "Christian" behavior and purifying their beliefs and practices from "demonic" elements (103–110). Both the RSS activists and the Christian fathers conceived Hinduism and Christianity in homogenous and mutually exclusive terms and thereby amplified the cultural differences between the two groups (113).

RSS activists also attempted to endear themselves to Mohanpur villagers by establishing educational and biomedical institutions and by intervening on behalf of the villagers to counter the corruption of their political leaders. There was therefore in Mohanpur and elsewhere, Froerer argues, a "mimetic relationship" between the RSS and the Indian Christian Church. Both institutions were engaged in a "civilizing mission" and attempted to gain legitimacy in rural areas by establishing much needed educational and medical institutions while advocating the rights of underprivileged communities (13–14).

It is not surprising, then, that there might have been some tension between Hindus and Christians in Mohanpur. But these tensions, Froerer suggests, predated the beginning of RSS work in the area. Whereas the dominant Hindu families in Mohanpur derived their wealth from landholdings, members of the more recently settled Oraon Christian community were forced to work for cash as laborers in the village and elsewhere. Over time, their hard work and cash not only enabled them to purchase symbolically potent luxury items (like televisions), but also to offer mortgages to cash-strapped Hindu landowners. In addition, the Oraon Christian community made a great

deal of money from the production and sale of liquor. While customary prohibitions prevented village Hindus from producing alcohol, many of Mohanpur's Hindu men slinked off regularly to the Christian *basti* for a surreptitious drink at the dead of night. In these ways, the Oraon community became noticeably wealthier than the original Hindu inhabitants of the village, a fact which caused some Hindus to resent their Christian neighbors.

The primary focus of Froerer's book is on the way in which RSS activists in Mohanpur, working as what Paul Brass has called "conversion specialists," *converted* these complex socioeconomic tensions at the local level into the simpler, broader, more potent language of intercommunal conflict. They did so by linking these and other petty grievances to broader Hindu concerns about the survival of the Indian nation and of Hinduism itself (17–18). For example, RSS agents portrayed the production and sale of liquor as part of a secret, nationwide Christian scheme to bring down the Hindu community (243); evidence that Christians were prospering was proof that the scheme was working.

There are some flaws in the text. The maps are poorly reproduced, and there are a number of references which are missing or incorrectly alphabetized in the bibliography. There are also some problems of redundancy—many of the book's central arguments are repeated with little elaboration. Similarly, borrowed terms like "focalization," "transvaluation," "conversion specialists," "sons of the soil," and "politics of entitlement" appear over and over again with quotation marks and full reference details—a reflection, perhaps, of the fact that the book derives from a dissertation.

None of this, however, significantly detracts from the value of the text. There are available a good number of other scholarly monographs which speak in broad terms about the rise of Hindu nationalism in contemporary India. But none are as rich with ethnographic description as this book. And none of the others so clearly, subtly, and persuasively demonstrate how and why such ideas are able to gain a foothold at the local level. The text would be accessible to undergrads while still being of interest to even the most advanced scholar. I recommend it to both, and to everyone in between.

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