

Book Reviews

Pentecostals, Proselytization and Anti-Christian Violence in Contemporary India

By Chad M. Bauman

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Why are Pentecostals disproportionately targeted in anti-Christian violence in India? This is the question Chad Bauman sets out to explore, seeking to go beyond the surface level view that it is their aggressive proselytization activities that make them more susceptible in this regard (interestingly, a major flashpoint Bauman mentions here are proselytization activities that specifically target the young, those between the ages 4 and 14).

Bauman is not too concerned with the occasional communal violence in which Christians are involved, such as the widely reported Hindu-Christian that took place in Kandhamal, Odisha in 2008. Rather, he is concerned with the far less covered “routinized” violence experienced by Christians, overwhelmingly Pentecostals, on an almost every day basis, especially in rural India. This violence consists of physical assault and coercion (mainly beatings but also kidnappings, rape and occasionally murder) as well as acts that could result in physical harm (throwing rocks through windows, arson). By and large, it appears that the instigators of this violence are associated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (the RSS), the Hindu nationalist organization founded in 1925 that preserves and promotes the concept of Hindutva (“Hinduness”).

The opening two chapters lay the groundwork for the study. Bauman traces the history and nature of Pentecostalism in India and makes the point that it is the most public and fastest rising form of Christianity in

contemporary India. It also incorporates many evangelical characteristics and indeed it is difficult separate India's Pentacostals from Evangelicals.

But while the "in your face-ness" of Pentacostals certainly does lead to their disproportional targeting, there are other factors at play here, especially those relating to castes. Pentacostals by and large emerge from the lower castes of India. As such, their very public demeanour, as well as the fact that they have no interest in investing in the caste system, is considered a threat to the ritual purity of Indian society. In contrast, the leaders of the established churches- the ancient St. Thomas church, the Catholics as well as mainline Protestants- emerge from higher castes and have no real interest in challenging social stratification, and so injuring their own standing. And so they are more easily accommodated by the dominant Hindu worldview. Indeed, Bauman makes the point that for more than a thousand years relations between Hindus and Christians were rather cordial, and that the spate of violence now seen is historically recent.

The development of "othering" in India, and consequently the other as an object of violence, is also integrally tied to the emergence of India as a nation-state. Prior to colonialism, religious interaction was exceptionally localized and there was little consciousness of trans-religious camaraderie and solidarity. But with the various bureaucratic processes set into motion by the nation-state, a far sharper consciousness of a specific, othered Hindu identity emerged which gained momentum through the activities of groups like the Arya Samaj and RSS in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively.

On their part, Pentecostals make themselves the target of disproportionate targeting by purposely construing themselves as the "other", as the counter-culture to prevailing- in their mind, idolatrous- sensibilities. And they need to prove their faith by challenging these sensibilities, even if they sustain injury in the process. Indeed the martyr represents the full and highest embodiment of rupture with such sensibilities. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that Pentecostal women tend to be more assertive, challenging general, especially rural, ideals of femininity.

Ironically enough, though, it is the Pentecostal emphasis on a very Indian concern- faith-healing- that accounts in large measure for its current success in the country. Pentecostals are able to draw affiliates, and by degrees converts, both from Hinduism and other Christian denominations, through what is sometimes seen as their success in driving away misfortune. Like

practitioners in popular Hinduism, Pentacostals drive out the demons responsible for life's afflictions making them very attractive at the affective level of experience, despite their posturing as the "other". And it also ironic that it is precisely their perceived success in this sphere that makes them the target of greater violence. Bauman's study does well to bring out such paradoxes and nuances.

Even though there is less direct foreign missionary involvement, with a far greater emphasis being placed on native-born preachers (who understandably are far better informed with regard to the local culture but who are not so obviously seen as a neo-colonial presence) , there is still massive, unstinting financial support from the West, particularly America, for evangelical work- work that often takes a Pentecostalized form in India. Such Pentecostalized evangelism employs such resources to engage in direct missionary work, seeking to gain converts as opposed to mainline Christianity's emphasis on social and charitable service. For Pentacostals, it is often a question of spiritual warfare against the 'powers of darkness' and they see such mainline churches as having become too assimilated within Indian society. This leads Bauman to the pessimistic observation that violence against Christianity in India, where Pentecostalism is the most aggressive as well the fastest growing branch, is set to continue, at least for the foreseeable future.

And so who is finally responsible for this violence? Is it the fault solely of the perpetrators or are they untowardly provoked by an aggressive Pentecostalism? Bauman concludes the issue of culpability is perhaps not as clear-cut as it seems: while in secular India the law makes provision for freedom of religion, including the freedom to propagate religion- and so, the willingness to tolerate intolerance- this same willingness- if there are sufficient converts to an intolerant religion- may undermine the core secular principle itself (and this latter argument is employed by critics of proselytization and so is akin, as Bauman points, to anti-Sharia arguments in America). Perhaps, this rich, sympathetic ethnographic study reflects, the violence speaks not only to conditions specific to India, but to the nature of secular democracy itself.

