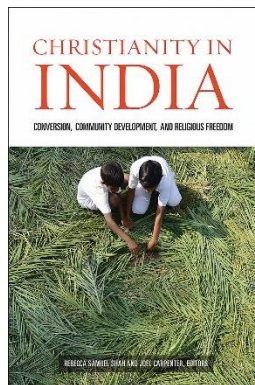


## BOOK REVIEW

# Christianity in India: Conversion, Community Development and Religious Freedom

*By Rebecca Samuel Shah and Joel Carpenter, eds.*

Reviewed by **Manohar James**



Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018. \$34.00

The collection of articles in this book discusses the contemporary contentious topics of Hindu nationalism, conversion, Christian contribution, religious freedom, and violence in India. As the editors admit, this work is not an exhaustive overview of Christianity in India or a missionary account, but rather a timely effort that provides clarity on the current complex issues the Indian church is facing under the pressure of Hindu nationalism. The well-written essays by Indian and Western authors encapsulate the historical, socioreligious and political contexts of anti-Christian violence and Christian responses to the suffering in one volume.

The book has three parts. The first part informs how Christian conversions have been negatively viewed and portrayed by Hindu nationalists, although many converts preserve their Indian identity and contribute to the development of the underprivileged and marginalized people around them. In the opening article, "Saving the Soul of India," Rebecca Samuel Shah has beautifully captured in a nutshell the historical backdrop of the rise of Hindu nationalism, which evolved through various sociopolitical and religious revivals beginning with Swami Dayananda Saraswati and Swami Vivekananda of the 19th century. She points out how the presence and proselytization efforts of

Semitic religions such as Islam and Christianity challenged, shaped, and helped the reconstruction of Hinduism and Hindutva ideology, enabling Hindu fundamentalists to show to the world that Hinduism is supremely ancient, authoritative, coherent, flexible, reasonable, inclusive, and tolerant. This reconstruction process became an inspiring focus of cultural and national unity, an anti-colonial political mobilization for Hindus and a prospect of self-evaluation for missionaries.

In the second essay, Sean Doyle shows how the Christian faith influenced Laxmibai Tilak, a high caste Hindu convert from Pune, and impacted her thinking in the areas of human dignity, gender equality, and social disparities. Her conversion and life transformation did not alienate her from Indian culture, but rather inspired her to dig deeper into her heritage, and to value and uphold the Indian identity, even after becoming a Christian. Doyle notes, "Her embracing of the Christian message and her shift in religious identity were the primary impulses that led to her active promotion of cultural renewal..." Along the same lines, the third essay by Bernardo A. Michael recounts the story of Anglican missionary C. F. Andrews, who reached across the boundaries of differences and left a legacy in India. Andrews was "quick to discern the divine working in the lives of others, even if they were from other faiths, a view that was not shared by many of his Christian peers." Contrary to the anti-missionary allegations, Andrews stood by Indians in their struggle for freedom and became an Indian nationalist who called for India's independence. Joshua Iyadurai's article, "Christian Conversion in India" helps clear the fog on the Hindu Nationalist perceptions against conversions by exposing the political agendas of the major leaders of nationalist movements and by contending that not all conversions are irrational. His empirical research shows that "conversion is not a change of religious identity, but finding a new identity in Jesus who transformed their lives, who gave them peace and joy, and who delivered them from sin and curse."

The second part of the book offers insights on the importance of understanding the integral relationship between evangelization and social transformation. Aminta Arrington's article, "American Evangelicalism, Social Action and Christianity in India," explains how American evangelicalism traditionally carried out its mission to the world with new activities and old paradigms. While enumerating the reasons why some American evangelicals emphasized social engagement and economic development beyond personal spiritual transformation while others did not, Arrington shows a few examples of Indian Christian practices and theologies on holism and suggests that "American evangelicals engaged in social action must not only look at what God is doing outside the West, but hear the interpretation of what God is doing from theologians from outside the West." In "What God has Joined Together Let No One Separate," Darren Duerksen unfolds the challenges and gaps between the Christian Developmental Organizations (CDOs) and the local church in South India, and shows the need for a close collaboration between the two to act as co-agents of missional transformation. While I agree with his recommendation for divine marriage between the church and the CDOs in India, I am doubtful whether his assessment of South India churches fully represents the reality of the churches and denominations across India. In my opinion, he has not clearly addressed the economic and literacy problems the local church faces.

The final part of the book focuses on how Hindu nationalism has been inspired, supported and promoted in various ways and forms, as well as how it poses a threat to the aspects of secularism affecting the religious freedom of minorities, especially Christians. Samuel Thambuswamy's critical examination of Bollywood films demonstrates that the Indian films, especially Karan Johar's movies, are invitational and inspirational to the people in India and to the Indian diaspora in the West to remain patriotic to their sociocultural pride, which privileges Hinduism. Thambuswamy argues that while Johar's films achieve success because of their exclusive vision of Indian-ness which is tantamount to Hindu religious identity, their undergirded Hindu perspective affords support to Hindu Nationalist spirit that promotes the demarcation of boundaries between "us" (Indians) and "them" (non-Indians). Karuna M. Johnson's interview of human rights advocates, John Dayal and Vijayesh Lal, captures the continued scenario of the opposition and persecution of Christians in 21st century India. The interviewees' assertion of the escalated anti-Christian violence and the suffering of Christians is made clear in Vikas Ram and Kay Higuera Smith's examination of the ground experience of persecuted Christians from four regions of India. In their research, the writers discovered that Christians love their country, culture,

and Hindu neighbors, even amid violence. They also enact biblical archetypes by remaining strong and hopeful in their dedication to Christ, despite suffering. In "Religious Freedom Among the Marginalized," Rebecca and Timothy Samuel Shah provide the historical context to the Freedom of Religion laws. They contend that under the influence of Hindu nationalist leaders, the ambiguity of the conversion laws restricts freedom of religion by placing a heavy price on the conversion of minority communities, reducing them to victims and objects. The price includes losing government benefits such as housing, food subsidy, and educational grants for children. In the final article, "The Burned Church," Paul S. Rowe addresses how pluralism and secularism are threatened by a single religious nationalist movement, and how the Hindutva movement fails to recognize the dramatic diversity of Indian society. He also maintains that under Indian pluralism, Christianity generously contributes to the development of health, economics and society.

This book is unique in a sense that it includes both historical and ground experience research which shows the ongoing Christian challenges in perspective and portrays a fair picture of the current Christian situation in India. It's a useful resource for researchers in the field of Hindu nationalism and Christianity in India.

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