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How Hinduism Dealt with British Colonialism

By: Arshia Sattar

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Manu Pillai’s new book is about the encounter between Hinduism and Christianity during the colonial period. He argues that this fraught relationship over 300 years, as well as the psycho-social mechanisms of colonialism, formed the basis of Hinduism’s transformation into the creed that it has become in the 21st century, one that amalgamates the authority that stems from religion with the political power of the state—a combination that has arisen in other times and places throughout history.

This is a complex argument, and Pillai elucidates it through a rich and complex tapestry of historical threads, giving them all the space, the citations, and the references they deserve. As a result, the book’s scope, as well as its physical heft, demands much from the reader. One must be stout of mind and body to enjoy all that *Gods, Guns and Missionaries* has to offer.

Pillai’s Introduction, in which he talks about the developments and changes in Hinduism before the colonial period, is quite masterful and lays the ground for the book’s central thesis. He argues that from its earliest iterations in the fire sacrifices of the migrating Indo-Aryans, Hinduism had modified itself as it faced new geographies, ideas, and religious belief systems. As the Aryans spread eastward across the Gangetic plains, they encountered mlecchas, people who were not like them—which, according to the social systems that surrounded Vedic practice, made travelling through their countries polluting. But conflicts within the Aryan communities as well as the need to seek newer pastures necessitated these gradual moves further into the subcontinent.

Brahmins shaped Vedic religion, and carried this religious and social order with them as they migrated further into the subcontinent. Apart from the esoteric knowledge they held so close, Brahmins had the practical wisdom to modify their ideas and fundamental beliefs as they went along. “For their vision of the world was mostly theoretical, its practical enactment proving messier than official narratives allow. Hinduism, as it would emerge, was not so much what Brahmins wanted; instead it is the story of their negotiations with a bewildering variety of counter-thoughts and alternate visions. Change is coded into its DNA” (pp. xviii-xix).

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Pillai the *sutradhar* (story teller) holds onto this thread of the Brahmins’ intellectual flexibility and leads us through a thousand years of social, political, and religious change in the northern river plains. Hinduism survives in this roiling diversity because Brahmins were able to adapt their ideas and practices to absorb the metaphysical and spiritual differences that might otherwise have seriously challenged and disrupted their grand enterprise. As the original thread of Hinduism’s framework absorbs contradictions, it becomes somewhat knotted when our *sutradhar* is faced with the advent of Islam in the north. But never mind, another thread emerges from the tangle and the story moves on over the centuries.

One of the great pleasures of reading Pillai is that the southern subcontinent features fully and well in the histories that he places before us. Pillai begins to elucidate his argument about Hinduism remaking itself yet again with the appearance of the Portuguese on the west coast, in what we now call Goa and Kerala. Portuguese political power in that region supported the proselytising zeal of the Catholic missionaries who arrived in the wake of the conquerors.

Pillai has the skill to pull arguments, hypotheses, theories, and anecdotes from a number of vast and varied sources. He then arranges them seamlessly in a composite narrative that reminds us of the butterfly and the hurricane—how seemingly unrelated events impact one another across time and space. For example, he draws on medieval European historical accounts and commentaries to say that the missionary zeal in India had much to do with the Reformation. As the Catholic Church faced more and more opposition, it turned to the colonies with their heathen populations to replenish the souls that had been lured away from its local pews.

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Among the many men of God in this section of the book, Pillai reminds us of Italian Jesuit Roberto de Nobili, whose radical approach to his work led to a dispute that was eventually settled by the pope. De Nobili adopted the clothing and demeanour of a Hindu sanyasi—he wore a dhoti and wooden sandals, shaved his head but for a tuft of hair on the crown of his head, and wore an interwoven strand of three strings across his chest, which he said represented the Holy Trinity. He learned Sanskrit and Tamil and used local words to explain and establish the central tenets of Catholicism. Living and teaching in the way of a Hindu holy man, de Nobili was able to reach high-caste Indians and persuade them to listen to him when he pointed out the areas in which Hinduism and Christianity held similar beliefs.

Soon Protestant missionaries followed their Catholic brothers, widening the conversation between Hindus and Christians. More and more, the discussions and debates became about the similarities in the two religious traditions. Behind the religion that revelled in many-armed gods who looked like demons lay the quietist beliefs of the later Vedas and the Upanishads in which a deep-seated monism could be discerned. That matched up well enough with the monotheistic doctrine of the Holy Trinity and with the more radical monotheism of Islam. By the 17th century, such distinct figures as the rationalist iconoclasts of the European Enlightenment and the mystic Dara Shukoh were persuaded that the truths behind their religions and Hinduism were, in fact, the same.

By the early 1800s in Calcutta and Madras, civil servants and missionaries alike were learning local languages to better communicate with (and control) local elites, both spiritual and temporal. By then, William Jones had already sent his Indo-European hypothesis out into the world, suggesting that Sanskrit was related to classical languages such as Latin and Greek, and that Hindus and Europeans had much in common in their linguistic and cultural heritage. Between the high passions of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, Europeans were eager to welcome Sanskrit literature and Indian religions into their fold. And Indian elites were eager to prove that far from being barbarians, they had been sophisticated thinkers for centuries.

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A closer and more empathetic dialogue opened up between the hitherto antagonistic traditions—for a brief period. But as the colonisers fell back on the inherent superiority of their own religion and began to interfere more and more in Hindu customs and rituals, the relationship between the contending faiths soured. Local histories and gazettes (which fill out Pillai’s “thick” narrative) are littered with records of skirmishes between Hindus and Christians, which were sometimes physical but most often legal and political.

The British developed two ways of looking at Hinduism—they either admired it for being a spiritual, philosophical faith or denounced it for being superstitious and cultic. Hinduism was being defined now by a narrative created by others, and the narrative gained traction because of the political power that supported it. “But now, itself faced with harassment, Hinduism would acquire a new defensive avatar. To regain agency, brown men—especially those exposed to the colonial state—would also place their religion in the white man’s prism ... Christianity laid the ground on which Hindus constructed their defence. Hinduism would, in key respects, be Christianised ... (with Hindus) reimagining faith as a defensible monolith; as a fortified, Protestant Hinduism” (p. 186).

Pillai pays his dues at the altars of the great 19th century reformers Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Dayanand Saraswati, detailing and analysing their movements away from and towards classical Hinduism. The tectonic shifts in religious thought and identity generated by these two men led to “a uniform Hindu identity [that] was no longer an intellectual argument alone, it was acquiring muscle to remake reality. Viewed another way, where Roy had set the stage with a theoretical basis for defending Hinduism, Dayanand went a step further. He became the grandfather of a mass-based Hindu nationalism” (p. 244).

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Pillai includes in this chapter the radical work of Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) in education and the political mobilisation of Dalit castes. Deeply critical of Brahmins and the oppressions they perpetrated on other Hindus via a pervasive system that favoured only them, Phule added a new dimension to the reforms that roiled the idea of what Hinduism was and could be.

The last chapter is devoted largely to Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, architect of 20th century Hindutva. As a young man, Savarkar was influenced by the fiery inclusive nationalism of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, but by the time he reached his forties, his ideas began to change. Now India needed to be one's fatherland as well as one's "holy land", a land which held within it all that was sacred to one's religion. By this definition, Christians and Muslims could not be a part of this nation, because their religious sacred sites were located elsewhere. It was only Hindus who were literal blood brothers, additionally united by a common past, the same trials, and the same triumphs.

To enhance the idea of the shared past with its humiliations and glories, Savarkar chose history to be the muse of his new narrative. "Savarkar naturally purveyed the past not as a scholar but as an ideologue. And where the shared past, so essential to his formulation, did not exist, it was made to exist" (p. 299). Pillai (and others) describe Savarkar's reading of Indian history as a "prolonged battle for Hindu self-determination".

Savarkar appears after 300 pages of densely told stories about the men who remade Hinduism once they were confronted with the "defensible monolith" of Christianity. Pillai is at the top of his game in this book, displaying all the qualities and talents that so many of his peers lack. He is a solid, well-trained historian who cites every source he has used. He knows how to dive into and (more importantly) emerge from the rabbit holes that historical research is pitted with. His determination to place the largely ignored southern histories into the larger narrative of India must be commended. For all the seriousness with which he writes, there is always a humorous anecdote, a witty aside that takes down a self-important historical personage, a nod to the informed reader.

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But Pillai has spent all the pages before his analysis of Savarkar telling us how Hinduism has defined itself against the colonising Other, the white Christian, only to lead us to a man who despises the brother, the brown Muslim. Are we conflating Christianity and Islam as Abrahamic faiths without singular tenets or particular histories? Just because monotheistic Islam came with conquerors and mystics rather than traders and missionaries, was there no 'encounter' between Islam and Hinduism based on belief? Does that mean that all Islamic conversions were by the 'sword' rather than gentler persuasions? Behind all this lurks the idea that the 'defensible monoliths' that only monotheistic religions can generate can also be the foundations for majoritarian nation states.

Pillai is not able to make clear why Savarkar turned so violently against Muslims. I don't think Pillai is alone in this; none of Savarkar's non-partisan biographers have addressed the issue adequately or convincingly. There are stories about unequal treatment in jail, where Muslim prisoners were given time to pray and Hindus were not. These privileges apparently upset Savarkar to the point of hatred. Against a backdrop of numerically determined electorates which could shape political power in some states, Savarkar might have developed an anxiety about Muslims having more wives and more children who would eventually threaten Hindus as a majority. But these reasons are either too slight and conjectural or too general to explain the kind of virulent intolerance for Muslims that Savarkar expressed from his middle years onwards. Perhaps we'll never know what motivated the man who spawned the ideology that changed the course of a nation's destiny.

Pillai reminds us that whatever their claims to being a-historical, all religions are born and grow and change in historical time. Writing about religious responses and movements is always tricky and Pillai walks that tightrope carefully. But below the tightrope walker who is suspended in mid-air, there is an elephant that stands in the circus ring, waiting to be acknowledged: did Islam have no impact on Hindu dogma at all? Or, do we minimise that impact by locating it in the margins of syncretistic practises and the folk lore of devotional traditions?

Gods, Guns and Missionaries, despite its somewhat misleading title, is a careful history, but in the end Pillai leaves us with troubling questions about how and where we explore the past to suggest answers for our present.

Arshia Sattar works with the epics and storytelling traditions of the Indian subcontinent.