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Book Reviews

Alpa Shah

David Mosse, *The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India*

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David Mosse, *The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India*

- 1 David Mosse's *The Saint in the Banyan Tree* is a scholarly feat of a kind that we don't often see today. Placed in an Anthropology of Christianity series, this is a must-read for anyone interested in Indian history, Dalits, caste and social transformation. The book combines rich historical research on Christianity in Tamil Nadu spanning four centuries alongside fieldwork data collected over the last three decades in a village Mosse calls 'Alapuram' in the Sivagangai District of Tamil Nadu. It is a study of the relationship between Christian religion and Tamil society, an exploration of how the very categories of religion and culture are produced in historically and locally specific ways. It is also an analysis of how caste has changed in Tamil Nadu in recent years and the role that Christianisation has played in anti-caste Dalit social activism.
- 2 Spanning four centuries, the book begins with how the worship of Catholic saints in Tamil temples forms a 'Brahminicised Catholicism,' enabling the entry of the Jesuit mission in Tamil society. Chapter 1 also explores the ways in which mass conversions of 'untouchables' in the colonial period changed the profile of Christianity and caste in south India. Chapter 2 looks at the tensions between missionary and local concepts of personhood, divinity and misfortune. Focusing on the village of Alapuram, Chapters 3, 4 and 7 look at the relationship between caste and Christianity, exploring the changing significance of caste for Christians, how caste gets both erased from public life but also politicised through Christianity, creating new political spaces for Dalits but also polarising Christians and Hindus. Chapters 5 and 6 analyse how Christianity has influenced different kinds of contemporary Dalit politics and in particular how Catholicism is today 'Dalitised,' inverting its early entry four centuries before. It is difficult to do justice to this masterly work in a short review so here I will focus on drawing out some of its central arguments.
- 3 Perhaps the most important tension explored by Mosse is that between continuity and change, in particular the way in which Tamil Catholicism enabled caste to remain unchallenged for centuries while at the same time providing a source for thought and action that is potentially transformative. Mosse's narrative begins in the sixteenth century with the remarkable Italian Jesuit Roberto Nobili (1577-1656) who presented himself as a Brahmin renouncer studying Sanskrit and Tamil texts, living in Madurai. Mosse shows how Nobili's strategy of 'accommodation' meant that the Church systematically avoided any confrontation with caste norms. Instead, caste was tolerated within Christianity. Distinguishing between the domain of 'religion' (where only Christianity was to be tolerated) and the domain of 'culture' or 'politics' (where one was free to pursue one's own traditions, such as caste), Nobili constructed knowledge about India through a mimesis that colonial officials and anthropologists (in particular Dumont) later reproduced. This theorising enabled Nobili to cast caste in the secular domain of 'politics' or 'culture,' as something for Christianity not to interfere with or intervene in.
- 4 The effect of Nobili's strategy was to traditionalise Christianity as a Brahminic practice (sacred threads and markers of caste were kept, bhakti cults through Jesuit renouncer gurus were mimicked) enabling the ease of its spread. Christianity spread because it did not present a threat to the norms of caste and offered a different route to salvation. Converts could not only retain their caste identities, but the missionaries also created parallel divisions in the church with different priests for those from lower castes. Dalits were separated from other Catholics (at mass, funeral biers, cemeteries, separate routes for wedding processions, and denied the privilege of reading scripture or serving at the altar). With mass-conversion movements of 'untouchables' in the colonial period in the late nineteenth century, the impact

of Brahminicising Christianity was that caste was all-pervasive in the church. The Protestants—who were present from the 1850s—however, came to frame caste as religion and, reclaiming caste from the Jesuits who had secularised it, saw conversion as a struggle for freedom by the ‘outcaste.’

5 The history of the Catholic secularisation of caste came to have long-term impacts in Alapuram and the surrounding area. Mosse traces the history of Dalit struggles in the region since the 1960s and their relationship to Catholicism in particular. With caste secularised, placed in a domain of power and history that could be questioned, a stage was also set for the development of critical consciousness amongst Dalit Christians to question caste itself. The argument is that it is the placing of caste into the realm of culture and politics (not Catholic belief itself) that enabled a challenge to caste. This had an impact on how Hindutva politics, at the turn of the millennium, translated into the politics of caste; thrust against Dalit Christians—not any Christian—and as opposed to ‘caste Hindu.’ It also affected the failure of demands that Dalit Christians made in the 1990s against their exclusion from constitutionally protected reservations; their Christian representatives at the 1947 Constitution Assembly had taken it as a matter of principle that Christians would not accept special privileges based on caste. Above all, it shaped the emergence of a protest identity of Dalit Christians. As Dalit Christian priests and activists arose, they began questioning discrimination against Dalits inside the Church and created mass movements from within. Now, they struggle for rights and resources *as* Dalits, not as Christians. Thus Mosse suggests that Nobili’s project was mirrored several centuries later by a Catholic resistance to caste that has sought to Dalitise (rather than Brahminicise) Christianity.

6 Mosse concludes that in 2004, when he re-visited Alapuram, Christian assembly and worship was no longer caste structured. Caste, though, while less practiced and spoken about as an aspect of village life, is more visible than ever in public discourse where it is the basis of claims to equal rights. Mosse concludes that ‘Caste itself is paradoxical: caste distinction is evaded and erased from public space, and yet as a basis of claims to equal rights, caste is more visible than ever. Erased as village service and rank, caste reappears as a portable form of belonging and connectedness structuring opportunity’ (2012: 262). Caste has changed and Mosse explores the disconnection of work from caste and status, the decline of servitude related to caste, and the improvement in the material conditions of Dalits.

7 Among the dead, however, Mosse points out that caste is in fact alive and well; upper-caste Catholics still used separate funeral biers and did not share the church acanti with the Dalits. Mosse also acknowledges that the idiom of caste can still deepen discrimination against the poor who have to find ways to evade humiliation and spaces of discrimination. Though we hear something about the relative deprivation of aspiring Dalit youth, what we hear less about is whether in Alapuram Dalits remain overwhelmingly doomed to the worst-off jobs (as low paid contract manual labour for instance), as they are in many other parts of the country where caste remains alive in discrimination against those too often discarded as the living dead.

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