

BOOK REVIEWS

Spiritual Despotism and Modernity

J. Barton Scott, *Modern Hinduism and the Genealogies of Self-Rule*, Delhi, Primus Books, 2018, pp. xi + 265, Rs 950/-, ISBN 978-93-86552-69-3 (Hardcover).

Dr Vibha Arora

Associate Professor of Sociology, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Delhi, New Delhi.

Combining Weberian elective affinities and Foucauldian genealogy this volume studies the mobility of cultural forms and critique of priestcraft as it circulated between England (Europe) and India. The volume drawing on several sources (historical literature and cultural studies) makes an important contribution to understanding the modernization of Hinduism (social reform) diachronically, and traces the synchronic transformations between the West (broadly Europe) and the colonies in the nineteenth century. It also understands the impact of missionary activities that provided a spiritual legitimacy to politico-economic and the cultural subjugation of non-western contexts and an Orientalist representation of Hinduism.

The self-governing subject is a liberal modern ideal influenced by Protestant ascetic tendencies that emphasized religious values belong to the inner realm, the private domain, and connected with spiritual self-rule, while correspondingly the political domain was separated from priestly authority, and led to secularism. Throughout the narrative, the author often slips into using *Spiritual Despots* that perhaps could have been the original title of either the doctoral dissertation or a manuscript. In the author's own words, "by analyzing anti-clerical texts, the book shows how the critique of spiritual despotism in colonial India gave rise to the ideal of the self-ruling subject" (p. 2). The creative intertwining of concurrent intellectual developments in Hinduism in India and in Christianity (England and Europe) and political ideas of liberalism set the stage for understanding the decline in pervasive power of despotic priests, and other figures of tutelary religious authority. The push towards Protestant ascetic practices and self-rule was a precursor to development of nationalist thought (eminently evident in ideas and writings of M.K. Gandhi) in India. Gandhian self-rule and self-discipline was hence a revised definition and expression of secularism.

The book is organized into six chapters, an Introduction and a Conclusion. It is primarily an analysis of development of historical ideas, and analyzes the transcultural impact of flow of ideas during the colonial period, and how some thinkers and their writings and praxis influenced the direction of South Asian modernity. The first three chapters cover the historical period between 1810-1870s and focus on power of priest-craft while the remaining three chapters focus on development of ideal of self-rule during the 1860s to the 1880s by analysis of writings of Karsandas Mulji, Dayananda Saraswati, and Helena Blavatsky. The second part of the book focuses on these particular reformers who were active in colonial India during the 1860s to the 1880s and helped in the development of distinctively South Asian discourse on self-rule. The volume argues that priestcraft is one of the central and fundamental concepts, which has helped in the development of Indian modernity, and a peculiar variant of secularism. These arguments shape the emergence of the Gandhian strand and contextualize his experiments in ascetic self-rule, and situate his bio-politics. The reduction of self is the essence of non-violence, and appeals to the 'truth and non-violence' as principles of any religion and self-rule. In the late nineteenth century, self-rule emerged as one of the key concepts to understand religion, politics, and development of modernity. This volume enables us to understand this trajectory, and the cross-cultural fertilization of ideas between Europe and India, which is not an insignificant linear process but a circulatory one. Though it is written in lucid style, it is somewhat repetitive in its content, and technically requires better editing by the publishers. The volume is suited for courses pitched at the postgraduate level on South Asian Studies and Religious Studies.