
From its earliest days as an independent state, ethno/religious violence has been India’s constant affliction. Nothing that has occurred since that time can quite rival the horrific bloodletting that accompanied the partition of British India into two states, but the subsequent history of deadly inter-communal conflagration is in its own way comparably appalling in what it reveals about the enduring nature of divisive group hatreds. Like so much else in India that is jarring in the magnitude of its incongruities, this history co-exists with a story of democracy that is remarkable for having unfolded as successfully as it has within such an inhospitable environment.

In The Clash Within Martha Nussbaum uses the occasion of an unusually depraved episode of communal violence in 2002 to explore the condition of and prospects for religion and democracy in India. The vileness of what occurred in Gujarat, a relatively flourishing state in western India and the home of Mohandas Gandhi, was shocking even to those in that country who had become inured to having their lives punctuated by reports of violent riots. What had become ubiquitous could not prepare one for the genocidal brutality accompanying the alleged retaliation by Hindu mobs after a train carrying Hindu pilgrims was set on fire killing fifty-eight passengers. Nussbaum’s graphic summary of the carnage requires no elaboration:

Approximately half of the [over two thousand] victims were women, many of whom were raped and tortured before being killed and burned. Children were killed with their parents; fetuses were ripped from the bellies of pregnant women to be tossed into the fire. (2)

Nussbaum carefully reviews the evidence surrounding this wretched event and reasonably concludes that while the whole story of what transpired at the Godhra train station (in Gujarat) may never be known, certain facts are damningly clear. The mass killings and gory excess attendant thereto were aided and abetted by the local police, and the failure to restore law and order resulted from deliberate acts of commission and omission perpetrated by public officials. These officials were politicians from the BJP, the ruling party that, at both the
state and central level, supported the same Hindu nationalist agenda shared by organizations involved in planning violence against Muslims before the precipitating event. Nussbaum’s description of what happened is exactly right: this was not an example of spontaneous rioting; it was a religious/ethnic pogrom that implicated the political order in all its gruesome particulars.

Most Indians are familiar with the controversy surrounding the Gujarat pogrom of 2002 and its aftermath, but *The Clash Within* was written for an American and European audience. Informing this audience of events that very likely escaped their attention is not, however, Nussbaum’s principal goal in writing this book. Rather, as she indicates at the outset, her main purpose is to invoke the Indian case to challenge the “clash of civilizations” thesis, “according to which the world is currently polarized between a Muslim monolith, bent on violence, and the democratic cultures of Europe and North America.” (ix) In opposition to this thesis, most famously enunciated by Samuel Huntington, Nussbaum argues that

the real clash is not a civilizational one between “Islam” and “the West,” but instead a clash within virtually all modern nations—between people who are prepared to live with others who are different, on terms of equal respect, and those who seek the protection of homogeneity, achieved through the domination of a single religious and ethnic tradition. (ix)

This clash, she insists, is also enacted at a deeper level in the Gandhian sense of a struggle within the individual self between competing propensities towards the other for domination or acceptance.

Nussbaum draws upon multiple sources—legal, cultural, historical—to advance her central argument. While much of her presentation will be familiar to close followers of the Indian scene, her target audience will find ample material to engage in comparative reflection about the threats to democratic institutions that are entwined in the complex realities of social and religious diversity. Perhaps the most ubiquitous of these realities are the divergent strands of tolerance and intolerance that co-exist uneasily within the traditions and experience of all the major faith communities around the world. The heterogeneity of civilizations creates obvious difficulties for the Huntington thesis, as Nussbaum demonstrates with considerable effect in her sustained examination of the ebbs and flows in the fortunes of the Hindu right in India. This exploration takes her to many of the most contentious issues in Indian society, and through them back to the tragic events in Gujarat.
Common to all of these controversies is the challenge posed by *Hindutva*, the calling card of those seeking a conflation of Hinduism and the Indian way of life. It is such a formidable presence in Indian life in part because its real essence and purpose—ethno/political nationalism—is often concealed beneath the more palatable veneers of religious piety and democratic majoritarianism. Yet at root it is not concerned with affairs of the soul, but rather with fostering a racial and cultural understanding of Indian identity. Indeed, the originator of the term, Veer Savarkar, was both a non-believer and an admirer of European fascism. Hinduism, like *Hindutva*, can be considered a way of life; but should it be, as the advocates of the latter contend and desire, prescriptive for all the people of the subcontinent? The framing of the Indian Constitution may have been inspired by Gandhian and Nehruvian conceptions of a tolerant composite culture, but that has not prevented the proponents of the culturally assimilationist view from cleverly using the law as part of their effort to reconstitute India as a Hindu nation.

Nussbaum has many sensible things to say about all of this, and her insights are occasionally sharpened by access to key figures associated with the Hindu right. Her reflections, for example, on the debate over the replacement of the existing systems of personal law with a Uniform Civil Code illuminate issues—discrimination against women and subordination of Muslims to the will of a Hindu majority—that were central to the violence in Gujarat. Similarly, her consideration of the curriculum wars, featuring a disciplined campaign by the forces of intolerance to reinvent the past by expunging from the Indian narrative truths that complicate their ethno/religious story, helps us to understand how a climate of hate could fester within a polity formally committed to a norm of equal concern and respect.

More controversially, Nussbaum pursues a psychoanalytic approach to understand the intensity of the violence in Gujarat. Her emphasis on the Hindu right’s preoccupation with purity and respectability, and its unrealized culture of masculinity as the key to its strange obsession with Muslims, will appeal to some readers and arouse skepticism in others. The latter group likely will include those familiar with a vast political science literature that is largely ignored by Nussbaum. A psychological interpretation is not incompatible with the accounts appearing in this literature, which variously emphasizes such factors as state-sponsored orchestration of violence, variable levels of civic engagement in the relations between Hindus and Muslims in comparable localities, and correlations between communal violence and electoral politics; but its persuasive power is diminished by the author’s
failure to situate her favored explanation within alternative accounts of the events in question.

As for Nussbaum’s primary concern, her multifaceted treatment of the Hindu right’s activities is only partially successful in countering the “clash of civilizations” thesis. To be sure, to the extent that the thesis relies on a simplistic opposition between the West and Islam, or, as Amartya Sen has argued, a presumption regarding the unique significance of a particular categorization, her analysis of the Indian case certainly calls attention to its crudeness. Not only are Muslims in India typically the victims of an ideologically and ascriptively driven strategy of cultural purification, their victimizers’ early theoreticians were inspired by European racialists and fascists from countries whose people today find themselves under siege from what they perceive as the malign side of the civilizational divide. But if darkness and light cannot so easily be dichotomized in these terms, the Indian example, while anomalous in a way that cautions against reflexive portrayals of worldwide antinomies, does reinforce the idea of a split between the forces of reason and unreason that coincides with the larger international struggle between secular democracy and a militant religion, most often, if not exclusively, linked with radical Islam.

Secularism on the subcontinent has its indigenous roots and sources, but the architects of the Indian secular state—most importantly Jawaharlal Nehru—drew at least as heavily upon the West for inspiration as did their nativist adversaries. Of the three great names of twentieth-century India, it is Nehru who, revealingly, disappoints Nussbaum the most.

His disdain for religion, together with his idea of a modernity based upon scientific rather than humanistic values, led to what was perhaps the most serious defect in the new nation: the failure to create a liberalpluralistic public rhetorical and imaginative culture whose ideas could have worked at the grassroots level to oppose those of the Hindu right. (82)

More than Nehru or Gandhi, India needs Tagore, “for only a shared public poetry can give flesh and life to the bare bones of constitutional ideas...” (335)

Nussbaum is right to see a need for the poet’s gift. For some people, the appeal of a noble political idea is sufficiently powerful that it can create an identification with the nation that requires no mediating or intervening agent. Many more depend on the sort of visceral connection to the national community that is achieved in other and more traditional ways. For them the Hindu right’s “European romantic ideas of
nationalism and unity” must be countered, in part at least, with the humanism of the poet. As James Madison wrote in *The Federalist*, it was only “in a nation of philosophers” that “[a] reverence for the laws, would be sufficiently inculcated by the voice of an enlightened reason.” But at bottom the real antinomy is the clash between a unity predicated on transcendent principles of secular justice and one rooted in primordial attachments that may or may not be religiously based. Tagore himself “saw moral ideals as fully universal, transcending ethnic, religious, and national differences.” (90) To be sure, these ideals have to be shaped to accommodate the particularities of place and circumstance. Yet whatever his failures, Nehru’s leadership enabled this accommodation to take root in one of the world’s most uncongenial settings for constitutional democracy. Tagore’s poetry can only improve upon this signal achievement.

That India’s democracy succeeded as well as it has should not, as Nussbaum’s book demonstrates, lead to complacency. But one of its successes may very well have been the failure of radical Islam to capture the imagination of India’s vast Muslim population. The Hindu right’s insistence that the “pseudo-secularism” of Indian constitutional law and interpretation privileges the nation’s Muslim minority is a distortion that nevertheless resonates against a well-founded assumption that were it not for the constitutional settlement, there would be a more objective grounding for Muslim alienation. Thus, one has to be careful in using the Indian example as evidence for the fallacy of the Huntington thesis. While it may draw attention to a more certain fallacy, that of assuming that there is something inherent within Islam causing it to clash with the West (or however the opposition can best be represented), it does not undermine the larger point that the reduction of international tensions will remain elusive if major concentrations of Muslim populations remain outside the ambit of a constitutional governance that is constitutional in more than name only. Of course, the tragedy of Gujarat is a shocking and instructive reminder that constitutional government may itself be insufficient if the spirit of moderation is experienced only as a cry in the wilderness.

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