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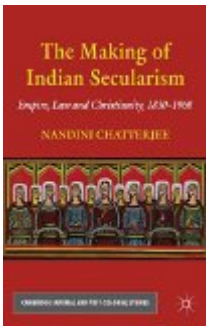
Nandini Chatterjee. *The Making of Indian Secularism: Empire, Law and Christianity, 1830-1960.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 337 S. ISBN 978-0-230-22005-8.



Reviewed by Sebastian Schwecke

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With 'The Making of Indian Secularism' Nandini Chatterjee has provided a monograph which significantly enhances our understanding of "the complex, contradictory and often unintended trajectory of a bundle of laws, political ethics and institutional cultures of dealing with religion that are distinctly modern and distinctly Indian" (p. 244). In doing so, Chatterjee contributes to a shift in the study of secularity in India from its long-standing emphasis on comparing the Indian variety of secularism with its various western and non-western counterparts, a pre-occupation which is rooted in a desire to establish the place of an 'Indian' doctrine of secularism, howsoever defined, as a distinct model and possibly even a role model to be emulated by others. Chatterjee sets out from a history of law perspective which tends to highlight historical detail and, at times, provides the impression of an almost accidental character of the evolution of secular ideas and practices in India. In this she provides a refreshing contrast to the large volume of studies which portray the evolution of secularity in India as an almost necessary outcome of an inherent Indian cultural ethos, invariably located within Indian religious practice, the logical conclusion of efforts to ensure social harmony in a deeply multi-religious society, or simply the drive towards modernity which may have begun as a colonial import but has been adapted to Indian circumstances by a modernising agency of (more or less) enlightened political leaders.

In line with this approach, Chatterjee locates one of the important driving forces behind the emergence of Indian secularism in the situation faced by Christians and Christian communities in colonial India. While her work in this way serves to illuminate a mostly understudied area, this focus leaves out a variety of other factors. Her work cannot be seen as a comprehensive history of Indian secularism but, rather, as a history of the Christian impact on secularity in colonial India. Nevertheless, she meticulously traces the integration of debates related to this impact into the larger socio-political churning of the colonial period. Rather than locating a concise and coherent agency, she stresses the place of the various Christian communities in the messiness of colonial Indian society and identifies the impact of Christian reac-

tions to these circumstances as (often) unintended drivers for the establishment of secularism in India. It is not only the trade-off between religiosity among the colonisers which finds its expression in educational projects that seek to replicate various British bourgeois conceptions of 'modern' religiosity and the pragmatism of rule over a mostly non-Christian population which defines the situation of Christians in colonial India, though the simultaneous proximity to the colonial rulers and marginal presence in Indian society faced by Christians is identified as a major source for reform efforts. Rather, the vast differences among Christians and Christian communities in India, apart from the obvious differences between sects and schools of thought also including the dichotomy between a Christian Indian elite and the majority of 'subaltern' Christians, are identified as roots of often contradictory developments carried forward by a large variety of actors.

Chatterjee traces the nitty-gritty of these reform efforts in the realms of law and education in the first two sections of her work and makes it a point to transcend the dichotomy between elite and subalterns by weaving the various strands of Christian activism into a single, though at times conflicting narrative. In the third and final section she strays into questions of community formation among Christians which have a rather indirect relationship with the original aim of portraying the making of Indian secularism in its historical details. Though this section provides further details on the situation faced by Christians in colonial and early post-colonial India and, at various times, does relate strongly to the earlier narrative, towards the end of her work it becomes easy to wonder whether the author sought to write a historical monograph on Indian secularism or Christianity in India. All in all, as mentioned above, Chatterjee overemphasizes the factor of Christianity vis-à-vis Empire, Law and Education, the other topics addressed by her, and vis-à-vis non-Christian agency from within Indian society.

This overemphasis, however, does not detract from the main thrust of her analysis which seeks to identify the emergence of Indian secularism from the messiness of the social churning created by colonialism in India, as a series of reactions to an ever-fluid social context rather than a blueprint for modernisation. The role played by Indian Christians in this respect may not have been as decisive as Chatterjee occasionally seems to imply, yet the community constitutes a well-selected case study for detailing the individual as well as collective agency which – eventually – resulted in the formation of a highly specific regime of secularity which – despite post-colonial attempts at codification –is still very much evolving or, rather, adapting to the changing parameters of the discourse in very similar ways, as a series of often isolated and at times contradictory events embedded into a larger framework of changing social relations.

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