

The volume under review begins with a solemn intonation in very first line of the Foreword by L.K. Advani, quoting Augustus (*sic*) Comte: “Demography is destiny”. Certainly the kind of destiny visualised here raises a number of issues which imply an agenda that needs to be seriously addressed.

The first set of issues concerns the starting point of the endeavour. At the outset one might well ask: why religious demography in the first place? We get some inkling of this in Advani’s foreword (pp. xv – xvi):

“First, knowing, predicting and controlling social and economic pressures created by our changing demographic patterns is essential for the successful completion of the noble task of the [*sic*] nation building ... Second, ... knowing the changing demographic patterns ... to make judgments about the strategic pressures India is likely to face within its neighbourhood in the near future.” (p. xv)

Finally, eulogising how “...for more than a millennium, India has been host to some of the greatest most vigorous and expansive religions of the world”, and how “[t]his circumstance has endowed India with a rich diversity; but it has also given some of the most acute political and administrative problems that the nation has had to face in the past and continues to face today”, Advani concludes that the: “rigorous and continuous observation and analysis of the changing demography of different religious groups in various regions of the country is therefore of paramount importance in maintaining the integrity of our borders, and peace, harmony and public order within the country.” (ibid.)

Advani is indeed explicit about the “rich diversity” that India has been

Demography as Ideology

Religious Demography of India
by P. Joshi, M.D. Srinivas and J.K. Bajaj
Chennai: Centre for Policy Studies, 2003

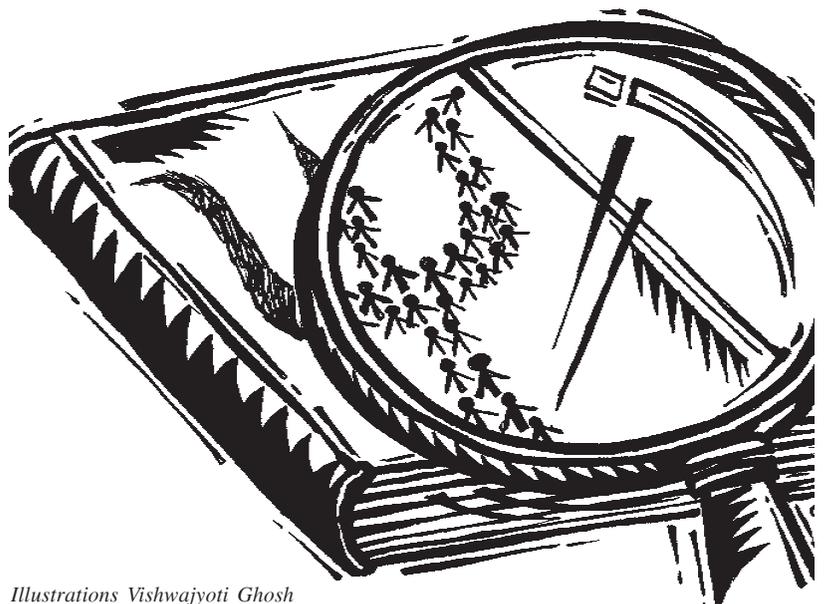
○ Review: Rudolph Heredia

endowed with, though he says nothing explicit about maintaining it, but only refers to the problems it has caused for the Indian nation. However, it would seem that his understanding of ‘the Indian nation’ may itself be the problem – and must certainly be, in the light of our Constitution and the freedom movement that gave birth to our democracy.

The authors carry Advani’s agenda a step further in their Preface. In place now of “the rich diversity” of India they talk of “the homogeneity of her civilization and culture” (p.xvii). However, they observe that, unfortunately, “...this cultural homogeneity has come under stress

during the last two hundred years or so under the influence of modern ideologies that tend to look upon the homogeneity of India as a source of a [*sic*] oppression and backwardness. This ideological prejudice manifests ... in the name of protection of distinctive ways of life of religious minorities, especially to those belonging to Islam and Christianity. Such influences have led to Partition of India into three separate political entities; religious heterogeneity of certain parts of India formed the sole basis for this.” (p.xvii)

The Partition of 1947 resulted in two ‘entities’, not three; surely the 1971 separation of Bangladesh from West Pakistan could not have been on the



Illustrations Vishwajyoti Ghosh

basis of religion! The oversimplifications here are too obvious and colossal to warrant comment. Such conclusions and/or assertions, as are found in the Foreword and the Preface, are not demonstrated in the rest of the book. But of course they do position the authors' own pre-occupations and concerns.

There is a crucial difference between demography as a discipline and demography as an ideology. It is my contention that the authors of this book clearly subscribe to the latter. If statistics can be misused, so can demography. Indeed, if there are lies, damned lies and statistics, it is tempting to draw a parallel with devils, demons and demographers. Or at least religious demographers of a certain kind!

Questionable Variables

The second set of issues is methodological and conceptual. Classifying and categorising demographic groups solely on the variable of religion, hardly presents either an adequate profile of the groups concerned or an adequate basis for either projection or interpretation. For religion is never in total isolation from other social realities. It is neither a causative nor an independent variable in many socio-cultural and eco-political areas of social life.

Religious groups are extremely diverse and this is nowhere more true than in this subcontinent. Besides socio-economic differences of class and caste, there are differences of culture and language, not to mention political affiliation and ideology. To pretend that all this can be collapsed into a single religious homogeneity does violence to the data and robs it of any kind of explanatory power that could be derived therefrom. It would be more adequate to the purpose to differentiate religious groups with a

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variety of variables and categories, so that a more fine-tuned and comprehensive profile is obtained of diversity within the same religious groupings.

Thus, with regard to demographic projections, without the simple device of a population pyramid it would be impossible to make any accurate projections of demographic growth over any reasonable period of time. Gross population growth rates are a crude and misleading device. In other words, it is essential to place demographic data on religious groups within socio-cultural and eco-political contexts, let alone other critical areas such as historical situation and ecological sustainability.

The only kind of nuance the authors give their data in this religious demography is geographic – and this precisely to prove their thesis of a rapid decrease among ‘Indian Religionists’ as opposed to Muslims and Christians, on the basis of which to infer “dangers” to the integrity of the nation. This is but alarmist panic-mongering that plays on unfounded fears, especially those that survive in people’s ‘unconscious

ideologies’ even when factually disproved.

India’s North-Eastern states thus come in for special attention as already slipping out of the Indian Union because of the increase of Christians there. But, of course, the separatist movement of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), where the insurgents are Vaishnavites, is never addressed, nor are the issues of the Bodos demanding their own homeland, or, earlier, of the Gurkhas doing likewise in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The constant and continuing violence between insiders and outsiders in the North-East, whether those involved be Biharis, Bengalis or Bangladeshis, should surely alert us to the other factors involved in the turmoil in this region of the country.

The real problems obviously are not just demographic or religious, they are developmental and cultural, as a result of which ethnic groups have become alienated and thus have mobilised themselves for violent confrontations, not just with the national government, but against each other as well. The violence among Christian Nagas belonging to different sects and the hostility between militant Hindu groups are significant indicators of this.

Akhand Bharat vs. Indian Union

Another methodological problem with the authors’ presentation arises from the way various categories are labelled. They “employ the term ‘India’, for the geographical and historical India that encompasses the three countries into which India was partitioned in the course of the twentieth century. The individual countries are always referred to as the Indian Union, Pakistan and Bangladesh.” (Preface, p. xviii)

This results in a certain slippage later in the text when India is mentioned without inverted commas

and statistics are presented about the rapid increase of Muslims in India (*sic*), which actually is made to refer to the whole sub-continent including Pakistan and Bangladesh. If one is giving an especial meaning to a word, then the indication should be used all through the text. It would be much clearer to speak of India as the Indian Union, as is done in current parlance, and of *Akhand Bharat* as the whole sub-continent, as is done by those closer, perhaps, to the authors' persuasions.

Again there is their deployment of a newly coined label, 'Indian Religionist', to include Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, all indigenous religions, and also, oddly, Parsis and Jews. The excluded categories are Muslims and Christians, "since this book is concerned mainly with the heterogeneity introduced by Islam and Christianity." (p. xviii) The attempt seems to be to put non-proselytising or non-converting religions into one category and set them against the other two. Is there no other relevant religious heterogeneity in the subcontinent? Should we fall into the discredited racial categories of Semitic and non-Semitic or Aryan and non-Aryan religions? What does this say about the ideological assumptions the authors bring to their demography? Surely any kind of religious demography would need to distinguish Buddhists, especially neo-Buddhists, from Hindus, particularly when the neo-Buddhist movement is aimed precisely at defining the lower castes as separate from and opposed to caste Hindu society? Indeed Buddhism since the time of Ashoka has been a missionary religion, as in ancient times Zoroastrianism and Judaism were too, especially in periods when they were the state religions of powerful empires.

The Sikh demand for a distinct identity, goes back to the 1920s, when the Hinduising *mahants* were replaced by the Akalis at Harmandir Sahib. In the light of the whole Khalistan movement, to not concede their own religious identity to the Sikhs seems to trivialise their legitimate aspirations. More recently even Jains have begun to assert their own distinctive identity. Indeed, Jainism and Buddhism are coherent and self-sustaining systems of belief far anterior to the Hinduism that is now extant.

Homogenisation

In fact, the whole category of 'Hinduism' as a religious label was really invented by the British census, and, even here, a more refined

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approach, would perhaps be more revealing. If classification by sect and cult is not always possible because of the uncertain availability of data, perhaps language and region, at least, could serve as more useful parameters. But obviously such niceties do not seem to have been part of the overall agenda of these religious demographers. Similarly, to homogenise Muslims and Christians into monolithic categories is ham-handed, to say the least. Christians are divided into numerous churches – Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox – not to mention differences of region and language and even caste and tribe among them. Further, there is, even

within the larger Catholic Church, a division of rites: Latin, Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara.

Muslims too are extremely diverse: Sunnis and various Shi'a sects such as the Boris and the Khojas. The Muslims of South Asia include not only various Sunni lineage-groups such as the Saiyyads, Sheikhs and Ansaris, but also Shi'a sects such as the Ismailis, Dawoodis and the Suleimanis, as well as regional groupings such as the Kutchi Memons and the Rajput Meos. Each grouping has its leaders and spokespersons; and among all these, once again, there surface the divisions and tensions of region and language and even caste.¹

Playing on Insecurities

The third set of issues refers to policy implications. It would seem that electoral politics is already entrenching vote banks, and precipitating an identity politics which displaces the real issues on the national agenda for some rather pseudo ones. Religious communalism has divided the country into violent and opposing groups, which have ever so often indulged in riots and atrocities against each other. Caste and ethnic divides too have been no less violent. The recent violence against Biharis in Assam, the corresponding retaliation in Bihar, the Shiv Sena's "*Mi Mumbaikar*" intimidation of outsiders are all variations on the dangerous "sons of the soil" theme. The list gets longer all the time.

Clearly what we need is to defuse such divisions and exclusions rather than accentuate them. *Religious Demography* does precisely this in a rather regressive way. However, what begins with religion all too often does not end there. Surely the history of our neighbours in the subcontinent

ought to be lesson enough for us. Do we really want to ride this tiger, only to find out, too late, that we cannot get off without being eaten ourselves?

If community identities are used to mobilise a group, it has to be for a cause that, in the final analysis, is larger than the group itself, such as the fundamental rights of life and liberty, justice and equality. The class struggle we precipitate has to be directed towards moving to a classless society, just as caste conflict must move towards a casteless society. And if religious identities are at all to be mobilised, then it must be for a secular society that gives space to all religious communities. This is hardly achieved when religious identities are mobilised by playing on the fears that the majority group may become a minority in its own territory. Many dominant, ethnocentric groups suffer from such fears. In Britain, with Enoch Powell, it was, "Keep Britain White"; in the United States of America it was, "Go back where you came from," during the civil rights movement in the 1960s – and that in a nation of immigrants! In India too such fears go back to the 1920s in Bengal, drawing upon what Chakrabarti calls the 'communal common sense of dying Hindu'.²

Diversity in Unity

In the end it is a matter of how we envision the country's future: homogenised under a cultural nationalism as understood by the majority community, or full of the richness and diversity that the founders of the nation prized and privileged. What is most alarming is that the kind of homogeneity insinuated at by the Sangh Parivar's cultural nationalism is unreal, and is likely to precipitate further divisions rather than eliminate divides. The only kind of unity possible with the

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rich and enduring diversity of India can be one of unity in diversity, or, to change the emphasis for a pluralist society, of diversity in unity.

Clearly demographic imbalances have to be faced, and obviously there must be policies made for discouraging runaway population growth or a too-rapid population decline, or for addressing a dangerously skewed gender imbalance. But the way to do this is not by aggression and violence. The demographic misadventures of the compulsory sterilisations of the Emergency should have taught us this. Amartya Sen points to the Kerala model that achieved a

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population growth rate comparable to China without any of the draconian measures that were used in the latter. Certainly this is a lesson for the rest of country and for the world.

Wider Implications

The fourth set of issues might refer to the regional and international implications of the demographic projections made in the volume. The authors conclude that there is an overall decline of Indian Religionists in the region as opposed to Muslims and Christians, and moreover extrapolate an even more marked decline of these in the international arena.

With regard to the region, a more carefully nuanced analysis would show that the figures lined up by the authors could be reinterpreted to give a different story. In fact the overall figures from the region are hardly the cause for alarm that the authors make them out to be. If anything, if we really want to address the problem of population growth, we should encourage the kind of policies that would make for the Kerala model in neighbouring countries and in our own, especially in our northern states. If a particular community shows a larger than recommendable growth rate, then, whether it be a religious or a regional group, perhaps there would be a greater urgency to project and implement such policies there.

But, with regard to the international scene, the de-Christianisation of the Western World would not support the suggestion that Christians are rapidly increasing their numbers in the West. Westerners are leaving their churches in equal or perhaps even greater numbers than new members are joining them. This would seem to be the inevitable result of secularisation, and its

inevitable impact on organised and institutional religions. There is no reason to suspect that the effect on other religious communities would be any different, unless of course they are alienated, humiliated and demonised. Then the reaction and the backlash might be precisely in favour of religious revivalism and fundamentalism, rather than in a more liberal and secular expression of their religious faith.

This reviewer is a sociologist, not a demographer. Hence the fine-tuned technicalities of the figures that form more than two-thirds of this volume are left to the competence of professional demographers and statisticians. There seems no reason to contest the figures themselves since they are taken from the National Census. But it is precisely the way these are categorised and aligned, tabulated and extrapolated that cannot be

allowed to go unchallenged and uncontested.

I began by saying this volume warranted a serious response, not because its thesis has any validity, but because it seems to be an attempt to press the demographic panic button. P.H. Reddy does something similar, though not as crudely, in trying to establish higher fertility rates for Muslims over Hindus in this country.³ Roger and Patricia Jeffery have criticised such efforts by Moulasha and Rao⁴ and take Reddy to task for the same.⁵ But this is at least a controversy among demographers. The Jefferys are much harsher with the volume under review, which they dismiss as the work of “demographic illiterates from the Sangh Parivar” But, then again, illiterates are those who cannot read; the ones who misread and misrepresent are too dangerous to be dismissed. Their work must be countered before it is absorbed into conventional wisdom, that is, into the prejudices of people’s “unconscious ideology”.

Such demographic ideology can all too readily condition the popular imagination into a receptiveness towards a dangerous and vitiating demagogy and is all the more lethal for its supposedly ‘scientific’ claims! It has in the not-too-distant past led to chilling *Blut und Boden* cries. In our country the *pitribhumi-karmabhumi* shibboleth is precipitating a similar kind of fanaticism, as has already happened in Gujarat when the Sangh Parivar faced a serious threat in the pre-Godhra situation.

Hindutva, once disguised in a cloak of objectivity and moderation, yielded to a Moditva that can hardly hide its nasty, brutish barbarism, despite its ability to provide a rich electoral harvest every now and then.

This is the concern that this review has attempted to deal with, by focusing on the larger issues, which are, however, inseparable from the purely demographic or statistical ones. All such aggregate data must always be interpreted within the context of the reality on the ground from where they come and of the conceptual framework in which they are read. The authors have amassed an enormous quantity of data so as to give a sheen of objectivity to their conclusions. But decontextualising such data makes of this venture a ‘scientific’ farce, in which the authors’ ‘religious demography’ is skewed by their political ideology and demonstrates not strength but weakness in numbers!

Endnotes

1 A recent issue of the *Economic and Political Weekly* has several authors writing to this point: “Muslim OBCs: Confronting Inequalities”, Vol. 38, No. 46 (15 Nov.): 4881– 4915. [year, please]

2 Chakrabarti, Bidyut, ed., *Communal Identity in India: Its Construction and Articulation in the Twentieth Century*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.

3 Reddy, P.H., “Religion, Population Growth, Fertility in Family Planning Practice in India”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 38, No. 33 (16 Aug 2003): 3500 – 3509.

4 Moulasha, E. and Rao, G.R., “Religion-Specific Differentials in Fertility and Family Planning”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, Nos. 42 & 43, 16 – 22, and 23 – 29 (Oct 1999): 3047 – 3051.

5 Jeffery, Roger, and Patricia Jeffery, “Religion and Fertility in India”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 35, Nos. 35 & 36, (2 – 8 Sep. 2000): 3253 – 3259. □

