

An Alarmist Reaction

Distortions in the Name of Political Correctness

○ J. K. Bajaj

In MANUSHI issue 141, Rudolph Heredia reviewed *Religious Demography of India* by P. Joshi, M.D.Srinivas and J.K.Bajaj (Chennai: Society for Policy Studies, 2003). The reviewer's contention was that "the authors' religious demography is skewed by their political ideology and demonstrates not strength but weakness in numbers." One of the co-authors responds.

The Census Organisation of India has been carrying out a rigorous and systematic count of the Indian population since at least 1881. In the thirteen synchronous censuses held since then, a question regarding the religious affiliation has always been asked. Before Independence, religion was also used in tabulating census data, so that an account could be had of the vital statistics and the social and economic parameters of India's various religious groups. Since 1951, tabulation of census data on the basis of religion has been discontinued, though the census still provides basic data on the numbers of adherents of different religions. *Religious Demography of India* presents this time-series data on the religion-wise distribution of Indian population generated by the census of India.

For the purposes of this compilation, the authors have divided the Indian population into three large groups: Indian Religionists, Muslims and Christians. In most of the book, "Indian Religionists" is used as a residual category; the numbers for this category are obtained by subtracting the numbers of Muslims and Christians from the total.

Indian Religionists thus defined include: Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and what the census refers to as followers of other religions and persuasions (ORPs). This last category consists mainly of adherents of community-specific religions prevalent especially in regions where the formerly forest-dwelling, so-called "tribal" communities form a fair proportion of the population. The census counts Jews, Parsis and Bahais also among the ORPs, but they form a negligibly small proportion of the total population. In 1991 the total numbers counted for Jews, Parsis and Bahais together add to only about eighty-seven thousand in a total population of 838 million. Thus the term Indian Religionists as defined and used in the book basically includes the adherents of religions of native Indian origin.

The data in the book has been compiled at different

levels of geographical aggregation. At the first level the data is compiled for the region that has been geographically and historically known as India and that is now divided into three separate political entities: the Indian Union, Pakistan and Bangladesh. At the second level, data has been disaggregated for these three entities and for their states, provinces and divisions respectively. At the third level data has been disaggregated up to the level of the district for almost all districts of the Indian Union.

At the India level, the data shows that the percentage of Indian Religionists has declined from more than seventy-nine percent in 1881 to sixty-eight percent in 1991. The authors' analysis of the trends indicated by the data suggests that the proportion of Indian Religionists within the geographical land mass known as India is likely to reach below the fifty percent mark sometime in the latter half of the twenty-first century.

At the level of the Indian Union, the data shows a decline in the proportion of Indian Religionists from 86.64 percent in 1901 to 84.44 percent in 1941, followed by a rise to 87.24 percent in 1951 as a consequence of the Partition, and again a decline to 85.09 percent in the four decades between 1951 and 1991.

For Pakistan, the data shows a rise in the proportion of Indian Religionists from 15.93 percent in 1901 to 19.69 percent in 1941, and then a sharp decline to 1.60 percent in 1951 following Partition. The proportion of Indian Religionists in Pakistan has remained around the 1951 level ever since.

For Bangladesh, the data shows a decline in the proportion of Indian Religionists from 33.93 percent in 1901 to 29.61 percent in 1941, then a fall to 22.89 in 1951 as a consequence of Partition, and a further decline to 11.37 percent in 1991.

Disaggregated data for the states and districts of Indian Union indicates that in the course of the twentieth century the proportion of Indian Religionists has declined

by a percentage point or two in every part. In large areas of the country, the decline has remained limited to this average level, and consequently Indian Religionists have continued to retain their predominance. But, in certain parts of Indian Union the decline has been much sharper.

Amongst the areas of such sharp decline, there is a long and contiguous northern border belt that begins in eastern Uttar Pradesh, runs along the border districts of Bihar and West Bengal, passes through Bangladesh and takes in all the districts of lower Assam. The belt encompasses undivided Baharaich, Gonda, Basti, Gorakhpur and Deoria districts of eastern Uttar Pradesh; Champaran, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Saharsa, Purnia and Santhal Pargana districts of Bihar; West Dinajpur, Maldah, Birbhum and Murshidabad districts of West Bengal; and Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nagaon districts of Assam. The proportion of Indian Religionists in this belt has declined by seven percentage points in the four decades between 1951 and 1991, with a corresponding rise in the proportion of Muslims. In several of the component districts and police-station areas of this belt Indian Religionists are in a minority now.

The north-eastern region of India constitutes another fairly large and contiguous area where there has been a precipitous decline in the proportion of Indian Religionists. The gainers in this region are mainly Christians. In Nagaland and Mizoram, Indian Religionists today form small minorities restricted to urban pockets. In Meghalaya, their proportion was about thirty-five percent in 1991 and is declining sharply from decade to decade. In Manipur they form a significant sixty-five percent of the population, but are restricted mainly to the Imphal, Thoubal and Bishnupur districts of the Manipur valley; in other districts of Manipur that form the predominant part of the geographical area of the state, the presence of Indian Religionists is insignificant. Much of the decline in the proportion of Indian Religionists in these states of the north-east has taken place in the four decades since Independence. In Arunachal Pradesh a similar decline in their share seems to have begun since 1971.

The western coastal state of Kerala is the third important region where the proportion of Indian Religionists has declined sharply in the course of the twentieth century. Their proportion in the state has declined from sixty-nine percent in 1901 to fifty-seven percent in 1991. While they have thus lost twelve percentage points of their share, the Christians and Muslims have both gained by six percentage points each. Interestingly, the Christian gain has occurred in the decades up to 1961 and almost all of the Muslim gain has been in the three decades since then.

Finally the authors have compiled data on the changes that have taken place in the religious profile of the world in the course of the twentieth century. That data indicates that though the proportion of Christians in the population of the world has remained unchanged at around thirty-five percent, yet the geographical reach of Christianity in the world has become considerably greater. Nearly a quarter of the Christians in the world in 1990 were from Africa and Asia; in 1900, ninety-five percent of the Christians were of European origin. The spread of Christianity has been especially spectacular in Africa, where Christians now form nearly forty-five percent of the population, and have a dominating presence in South, Central and Eastern Africa. Within Asia, South Korea has seen the greatest rise in Christian presence.

The proportion of Muslims in the world has risen from about twelve percent in 1900 to nearly nineteen percent in 1990. They have increased their presence in every part of the world, but the rise in their proportion has been especially spectacular in several countries of Africa, in India and Indonesia, and in a few countries of Western Europe.

Indian Religionists as a whole have more or less retained their share in the population of the world. The share of East Asian Religionists has seen a decline from thirty-two to twenty-five percent. Southeast Asian Religionists have slightly improved their presence. And the proportion of Native African Religionists and Jews in the population of the world has declined sharply.

We have provided above a somewhat long summary of the basic data and conclusions of the book because several of the reviewers, and perhaps most grossly the current reviewer, have tended to raise objections without specifying what the book contains and what they are objecting to. A reader of such reviews probably gets the idea that the book contains

something ideologically unacceptable and outside the pale of what the reviewers find politically correct; but he gets no idea of the contents and conclusions of the book.

The first and foremost objection of several of the reviewers, including the present one, is to our use of the categories of "India" and "Indian Religionists". Part of the objection to

the latter term is that by implication it defines Muslims and Christians as "non-Indian Religionists". This is a deliberate misreading of the term. We have clearly and repeatedly defined Indian Religionists as adherents of religions of native Indian origin. This definition of course means that Islam and Christianity are religions of non-Indian origin; but it has to be considerably stretched to make it

imply that the Muslims and Christians of India are not Indian, or are of non-Indian origin.

The second objection to our use of the term Indian Religionists is that by doing so we have included Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists and adherents of locality and community specific native religions in the same group as Hindus; and this in itself, according to the reviewers, is a cardinal sin. It is a given of current social-science theory in India that Hindus must not ever be counted with any other group of Indian people; in fact, as the current reviewer also insists, one should not even refer to Hindus as a single group and should always point out distinctions of caste and community within them.

We do not wish to argue that such distinctions within Hindus, and between Hindus and adherents of other religions of Indian origin, do not exist. But we do believe that there is a sense in which Hindus and adherents of other religions of Indian origin belong to a group, and to which adherents of religions of non-Indian origin do not belong. We believe that such a grouping does represent some significant aspect of the social reality of India today, though it certainly does not exhaust that reality. There are of course differences between Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists and followers of local community-specific religions. These differences can at times lead to acute rivalries between them and might have done so even more acutely in the past. Notwithstanding all this, there are still significant similarities that these groups share not only in religious beliefs and practices, but also in social, religious, political and historical experiences and perceptions.

Incidentally, we have devoted a separate chapter of the book to disaggregating the data for the groups that we have otherwise aggregated under the category of

We believe that there is a sense in which Hindus and adherents of other religions of Indian origin belong to a group, and that such a grouping does represent some significant aspect of the social reality of India today, though it certainly does not exhaust that reality.

Indian Religionists. Thus the book contains detailed information and tables on the numbers and growth of Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists and others in the different parts of the Indian Union. We must also point out that the major conclusions of our analysis, which have been summarised earlier in this essay, shall change little if we keep only Hindus amongst Indian Religionists and remove all others. Though almost all other religious groups, except the Jains, have grown at a rate higher than that of the Hindus, the latter still constitute more

In the convoluted frame of mind that the social sciences in India have propagated, efforts to split Indian society, and especially Hindu society, into smaller and smaller fragments are inherently to be lauded, and any effort to bring together similar groups, even for the sake of mere compilation and analysis of data, is inherently flawed, if not devilish.

than 95 percent of what we have termed Indian Religionists. In 1991, there were 717 million people counted as Indian Religionists in the Indian Union; of them 687 million are Hindus.

The objection to the term therefore is not that the data for Sikhs, Jains etcetera has been ignored, or that grouping them together with Hindus distorts our conclusions. The objection is that such grouping of Hindus with others ought never to have been done. In the convoluted frame of mind that the social sciences in India have propagated, efforts to split Indian society, and especially Hindu society, into smaller and smaller fragments are inherently to be lauded, and any effort to bring together similar groups, even for the sake of mere compilation and analysis of data, is inherently flawed, if not devilish.

The objection to our use of the term “India” is even more bizarre. “India” is a well-defined geographic, civilisational and historic entity. This entity was split into three separate and sovereign political units in the course of the twentieth century. We have referred to the undivided entity as “India” and the three units as Indian Union, Pakistan and Bangladesh. We have used the terms consistently and taken care to repeatedly define ourselves so as to eliminate any possibility of confusion. What can be the objection to this?

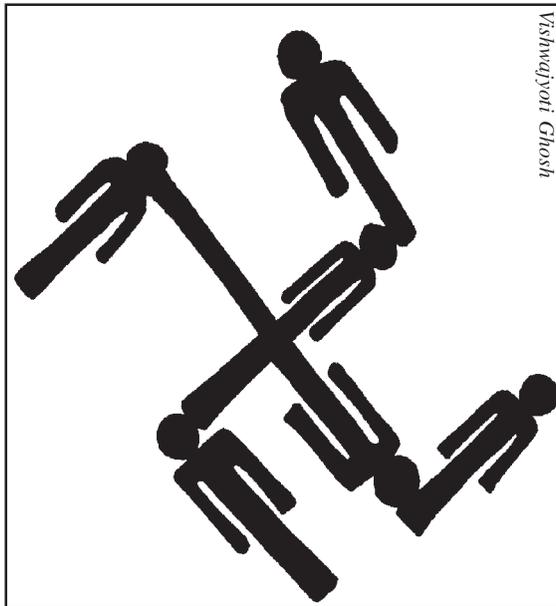
Several reviewers, and most strongly the present reviewer, insist that by using the term “India” for the larger entity and “Indian Union” for the current Republic of India, we are harking back to the times when India was not partitioned, and this is somehow illegitimate in their eyes. We find such objections to be extraordinarily cussed. Just because India has been politically partitioned, should we refrain from using the name “India” forever? Just because there are three sovereign states existing on the geographical territory of India,

should we forget the geographic, historic and civilisational unity of India? Other ancient countries have undergone partitions. Have they given up memories of their civilisational unity? Has the term “China” become vacuous because Taiwan, Hong Kong and other smaller units have been separated from it? Was “Germany” as an entity extinguished when it was split into two for a few decades? Does the idea of “Britain” and “British” depend upon the political unity of the United Kingdom? We feel repelled by the thought that there are scholars in India, who have objections to using the term “India” the way we have used. What kind of times have we arrived at when serious Indian scholars earnestly object to the use of a term merely because it is likely to evoke the memory of the geographic, historic and civilisational unity of India?

Besides these terminological objections, it has been claimed that our projections for the proportion of Indian Religionists in India are seriously flawed; and that we have indulged in panic mongering. Such accusatory comments mainly relate to our projections that the proportion of Indian Religionists in India is likely to go below fifty percent sometime in the second half of the twenty-first century. The facts are: The proportion of Indian Religionists in the population of India was sixty-eight percent in 1991; in the 110 years since 1881 this proportion has declined by more than eleven percentage points; the decline has proceeded from decade to decade for the eleven decades for which we have data; and, the quantum of decline in each decade has been higher than the previous decade. From these facts, it is difficult to surmise that suggesting

a decline to below fifty percent in the latter half of the twenty-first century is panic mongering. The objection of the experts is not so much to our procedures but to our temerity in compiling and analysing the data that the demographers and social-scientists of India had more or less put in quarantine.

The current reviewer has also raised a serious question. He has pointed out that, besides their religious identities, people also have other significant social, economic and political attributes. We are in complete



Vishwajyoti Ghosh

agreement with him. We have nowhere claimed that the religious identity of people is their only important attribute. However, we do not believe that this is a socially or historically vacuous category, just as the economic, political or social conditions of the people are not vacuous categories. We shall certainly be interested in learning how the religious affiliation of different groups correlates with their demographic, economic, social and political attributes. This is a matter of detailed, micro-level sociological study. We hope that since several of

the expert reviewers of our book have been so keenly concerned about these aspects, they shall begin a serious effort to understand these. Given the paucity of information on these aspects, we have refrained from commenting on these in our book. As the reviewers, even those who harbour serious doubts about our motives and integrity, would have noticed, we have only compiled the data on the changing religious profile of Indian population. We have conscientiously restrained ourselves from speculating on the social and economic causes or consequences of such change.

One final objection of the reviewers that we wish to take note of is their accusation that none of the authors is a demographer. We do admit to having ventured into an area to which we cannot rightfully claim to belong. We are certainly not trained as demographers; yet as students and practitioners of exact sciences we are no novices in dealing with numbers, or in systematic analysis. But perhaps we ought to apologise for first encroaching upon the sacrosanct business domain of the demographers, and then refusing to stick to what the social scientists have so assiduously defined to be the politically-correct discourse in the India of today. □

Note

Some of the other reviews that have been taken note of in this essay are: Partha Chatterjee, *Demonising Demography*, *The Telegraph*, 10 July 2004; review by Ashis Bose, *The Hindu*, 11 November 2004; D. Jayaraj and S. Subramanian, “Abusing Demography”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20 March 2004, pp.1227-1236. These and other reviews and notices of the book may be accessed at www.cpsindia.org.

The author is a physicist by training and has worked as a journalist for several years. He is the co-founder of the Chennai-based Centre for Policy Research. □