BOOK REVIEWS


This book deals with the nature and social and cultural consequences of standardised, mediated, religious content – Christian and Hindu – in India. The phenomenon of religious television in India can be made sense of within the growth of cable and satellite television, de-regulation, cultural and economic globalisation and religious nationalism that emerged in the late 1980s and that has become a more or less permanent aspect of national politics. One of the more interesting facets of Christian television in India is that it is, with one or two exceptions, aligned to the mission of a variety of global and local neo-Pentecostal, Charismatic groups. Their rather uncritical embrace of imported styles of televangelism has resulted in cultural dis-junctures – and this, as the study clearly reveals, is a barrier to effective Christian mission in India today.

Based on fieldwork conducted in Mumbai and Hyderabad and interviews with Christian and Hindu leaders, this study deals with both the correspondences and differences between Christian and Hindu television, the salient social and cultural aspects of the reception of both types of television, and the contested nature of both types of televangelism, framed against the background of cultural globalisation and simmering Hindu-Christian tensions in India.

This book is a contribution to the growing oeuvre of writings on mediated and popular religions in India, inclusive of Meera Nanda’s The God market: How globalism is making India more Hindu (2009) and this reviewer’s Strong religion/zealous media: Christian fundamentalism and communications in India (2008). Charismatic televangelism has begun to redefine the practice of Christianity in India along the lines of a commodified Christianity – hence the rather quirky, perhaps rather wordy title of this book. Similarly, the mediated practices of ‘lifestyle’ Hinduism with an accent on yoga, meditation and spirituality has connected to the desires and aspirations of India’s burgeoning middle classes. The author makes the point that Hindu televangelism has been shaped by its Christian counterpart – an insight that, in hindsight, is the way it must be, given the many interminglings and give-and-take between religions in India from time immemorial. The author also makes the point that for Charismatic television in India to succeed, it simply must be attuned to the ‘dos and don’ts’ of Indian culture that are derived from Hinduism’s orthopraxy – accent on practice. While Transnational Charismatic television does appeal to the educated middle-classes, it simply does not have the potential to become more than a service that caters to the needs of a segmented, Christian elite. There is a lot more potential for indigenous Charismatic television, although there
are, at the moment, few cross-over expressions of indigenous fare that appeal to the masses in India, irrespective of their religious affinities.

One of the strengths of this book is that it is a sociologically grounded study that attempts not only to account for the structures and practices of religious television in India but also its impact. Interviews with both Christian and Hindu leaders offer insights into their apprehensions, interpretations and understandings of televangelism. This book offers a textured account of global and local televangelism, within the contested nature of the church in India. It does, however suffer from some weaknesses including the following. First, the study suggests that the practices of mediated Charismatic are inexorably changing the warp and woof of Christianity in India. While Charismatic television certainly is the dominant expression of Christianity on television in India today, one can argue that by no means is that indicative of its extent and influence. There is evidence that some mainline churches have adopted worship styles from neo-Pentecostal churches – although ‘traditional’ churches such as the Orthodox Syrian have been relatively untouched by these new churches. Second, while television in India has certainly impacted on awareness, identity, consumer behaviour and the like, and does take pride of place in the living room in many Indian households, one can argue that its ubiquity is not matched by its influence. It is more likely that in the context of its becoming a part of the daily lives of people, they have adapted television to their own rhythms rather than vice versa. And as TV audience ratings in India routinely reveal, religious television in India has rather low (even miniscule) viewing figures when compared with non-religious television.

Third, the study also suggests that television has become the dominant means of Christian mission. While mission is carried out on Christian television, the investment in non-mediated Christian mission is both extensive and profound and continues to be the dominant form of mission today – schools and mission hospitals, service centres and community initiatives are widespread and growing. While organisations like the Chennai-based Sam P. Chelladurai Ministries and the transnational Christian Broadcasting Network run by the maverick fundamentalist Pat Robertson are primarily involved in television-centred mission, these are exceptions given that both mainline and non-mainline churches routinely invest in a variety of forms of Christian mission. Fourth, while it is certainly a good idea to compare and contrast different types of televangelism, the author succeeds in only touching the surface of Hindu televangelism since that requires an in-depth understanding of mediated Hinduism that is lacking in this volume.

Overall though, this book provides a number of insights and highlights the fact that religion is by no means a spent force in our world today. New technologies are both destabilising established traditions but also providing the means for the renewal of many religions. Moreover, this book captures the contested nature and continuing flux both within Christianity and Hinduism today against the background of generalised commodification that now is an aspect of both these religions. The author rightly points out that mediated religion now offers competition to established religions and that its impact needs to be taken seriously by those who belong to the more traditional religious establishments. This book is certainly a worthwhile read and will be of special interest to religion and media scholars. I would however like to conclude on a sober note. While it is critical that we deal with and account for the changing contours of religion in globalising India, it is also necessary
that our claims relating to change remain measured. For, in spite of far-reaching revolutions in the economy, culture and society in India, there remain extraordinary continuities in its religious traditions. A recent description of such continuities is in William Dalrymple’s *Nine lives: In search of the sacred in modern India* (2009).

References


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In the fast-paced new media world, three years is a long time. Conceived in a symposium organized by the editors in April 2007, this book was officially published in early 2010. Considering that both young people and ICTs come of age quickly, it may not be unfair to ask if the evidence and cases discussed are still relevant or already dated. To answer this question, it is important to recognize a recurring thread running through the twelve chapters. Despite their diverse backgrounds, these authors appear to concur that the transformative potential of ICTs has so far been an undelivered promise. Contrary to the many speculations, and often wishful thinking, that new media will hopefully bring more young people to civic participation, statistics like voter turn-out rates have suggested otherwise. In other words, that the Internet would turn the political and democratic world upside down has become more like rhetoric. Instead of advocating for or against such popular claims, the authors in this collection take a step back and ask why the many rosy promises are yet to be fulfilled.

The book is divided into four sections, namely theories, policies, identities and practices, and websites. The organization of chapters suggests that both theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence are stressed in the quest for answers for the key problematic here. The first three chapters question the very assumptions of the keywords at stake. The meanings of democracy, young people and participation are carefully scrutinized. In Chapter 2, for example, Janelle Ward recognizes the continuum between consumers and citizens, and through the discussion of terms like ‘the socially conscious consumer’ (p. 41) and ‘the critical citizen-consumer’ (p. 42), she explores the relationship between political consumerism and citizenship, and hence questions what political engagement or participation entails in the new media environment. In Chapter 3, Nico Carpentier discusses how
the banality of video films made by young people was heavily criticized, and hence exposing how often the word ‘participation’ is romanticized in celebratory discourses.

The section on ‘policies’ focuses on how young people are imagined by policymakers. The chapter by Stephen Coleman is particularly stimulating as he argues how young people come to be defined as a social group that needs to be addressed and handled in policies. He finds that young people are often positioned as ‘apprentice citizens’ (p. 71) who are subjected to different forms of citizenship training. These basic assumptions will in turn shape policies and strategies. From this premise, he moves on to explicate the differences between managed and autonomous citizenship. Equally interesting is his discussion of youth as ‘a self-proclaimed identity’ or ‘a biological status’ (p. 78), pinpointing a trend that youth is becoming more like an identity to be fashioned and sustained. With the clarification of conceptual differences between these contrasting terms, the author manages to show how citizens are being (re)produced in policy discourses.

In addition to the eloquent arguments and critical conceptualizations, the book also features a few articles that draw heavily on empirical data for insights. In Chapter 5, the authors analyze how a website supposedly representing youth voice ‘do young’ (p. 95), or ‘perform youth’. In Chapter 10, websites created and managed by media corporations, political parties and social movements were studied. It was found that young people are imagined to be spectators who are entertainment-oriented, visitors who look for pre-packaged information, political actors and learning individuals respectively. These findings are useful as they once again remind us that youth is far from a homogeneous group.

It is in this specific context that the chapters on identities and practices make their presence pertinent in this collection. If we stop seeing young people as essentially the same, the actual uses of the Internet, together with the everyday online practices of differing groups, will certainly inform our understanding of the intricate relationships between young people, the ICTs and democracy. Despite often being mundane and diverse, everyday practices of young girls in diaspora families (Chapter 8) and young sports fans (Chapter 11) shed light on how civic participation may not necessarily be the kinds of ‘civic participation’ one commonly envisages. The chapter by Maria Bakardjieva further highlights the notion of ‘subactivism’, which acknowledges the equal weights of actions of individual participations in cultivating citizenship. The attempts to look for ‘openings’ (p. 138), which refer to instances when the everyday lifeworlds of young people are connected to the political and civic world, suggest that there could be many other ways to engage young people in civic participation. The key will lie in our readiness to challenge, and broaden, the taken-for-granted notions of meaningful civic participation.

In view of the many reflective and critical perspectives, this book has moved beyond the exciting yet unconvincing rhetoric and presented a more down-to-earth picture of the ‘realities’ both young people and ICTs are facing. New directions are charted for further research and explorations. In this regard, notwithstanding the rapid changes in the new media environment, this book should be able to stand the test of time.

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