

Book Review

Conversion to Islam Untouchables' Strategy for Protest in India

By Abdul Malik Mujahid. Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1989

Many Indians were taken by surprise, anger, and dismay by several thousand South Indian untouchables when they converted to Islam in 1981-82. Hindu chauvinists violently reacted and formed the Vishva Hindu Prishad which later occupied the famous mosque built by the first Mughul ruler of India, Babur. Since then many attempts have been made to analyze the causes of the mass conversion which still continues, although not in large numbers. Abdul Malik's book carefully examines the regional and local causes as well as the consequences of this mass conversion to Islam. Malik explains the elements of the complex social matrix in which the untouchables used conversion as a "conscious and articulate protest" against a cruel and unjust caste system. This unique study provides a thorough sociological perspective that deepens our understanding of more than 200 million untouchables of India.

Malik explains, in the first chapter, the methodological and theoretical basis as well as the framework of his study. He raises relevant questions

that have been answered in the latter part of the book, questions such as: Why did the untouchables resort to the extreme measure of conversion? Were the conversions isolated cases or were they part of a long-term strategy? Why was Islam as a religion chosen? Malik suggests that the main variables in the process of conversion were the untouchables' "aggressive and assertive behavior." While developing his own thesis, Malik carefully examines similar studies by political sociologists such as Feierbend, Gurr, Grimshaw, Niebuhr and others. He critically evaluates their work and draws meaningful similarities. Yet he establishes a more comprehensive framework by redefining many terms such as violence and psychological violence in the context of the untouchables' conversion to Islam.

The second, third, and fourth chapters provide a detailed understanding of the caste system that is the core of Indian politics, the economic, social, political, and cultural milieu of the untouchables, the pervasiveness of untouchability in the Indian society, the nature of violence against the untouchables, and the helplessness of the untouchables in dealing with the political power that is embedded in the caste hierarchy of the social system in India.

Chapters five, six, seven, and eight basically answer the question: Why did the untouchables convert to Islam? These chapters provide a description of the Tamil villages, the leadership structure of untouchables in these villages and the leaders' perception of various government policies and actions towards untouchables, different ways of converting to Islam, a detailed study of Tamil Muslims, their economic, social, educational, and political status, and the impact of the Tamil-based Dravidian movement, against the caste-oriented Brahministic society, on the social awareness process of untouchables. Chapter eight looks into the factors that persuaded or motivated untouchables to choose Islam as their new way of life instead of Christianity or Buddhism.

In chapter nine Malik focuses on the much talked about "Arab Connection" and the impact of petro-dollars on conversion. While accepting that possibilities existed, Malik refutes the allegations based on his interviews and survey of the new converts. There are many interesting insights to this question that Malik brings forth. A new convert himself put it bluntly, "Why don't they purchase us back to Hinduism if we are on sale."

Chapter ten looks into the reactions, responses, and furor that the conversion generated in the Indian socio-political environment. In the last chapter Malik turns back to the theoretical discussion that he initiated in the first chapter. He examines the strengths and shortcomings of the main thesis of the historians and social scientists who have studied the spread of Islam in India. Although he was able to establish that all the theses (Coercion thesis, Reward thesis, and Social Mobility thesis) cannot properly explain the micro-level events such as the process of conversion, Malik remains one

step short of clearly presenting his own thesis, which one could read between the lines, but which deserved to be treated separately. There are few instances where one could disagree with Malik's observations or conclusions, such as his assertion that he "does not consider the conversions studied to be necessarily caused by a change of heart" (p. 8). Chapter ten, which deals with Hindu revivalism, could have been further expanded to seek the roots of Hindu chauvinism that have caused unrest, rebellion, and protests among not only the untouchables, but also on a substantially significant level among the Sikhs, Jharkhands of the Bihar, the Naxalites, the Assamese, and the Indian Muslims.

There is no doubt that Abdul Malik Mujahid has produced a very timely study that deserves the attention of scholars who are interested in understanding the socio-political matrix of the so-called largest democracy of the world. The book also contains three very useful appendices on 1) the studies of social stratification among Indian Muslims; 2) Ambedkar's conversion as a mild protest; and 3) women in the conversion process.

It would be fitting to conclude this review with the concluding remarks, from the foreword, by Lloyd and Susane Rudolph:

This searching book makes a major contribution to scholarship about religion and society. By carefully examining the local and regional causes and the national consequences of ex-untouchables' conversion to Islam in South India, the author has deepened our understanding of the beliefs and actions associated with the pursuit of social justice and equality in India.

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