

The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future

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In Review



The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future

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Martha Nussbaum is perhaps the most generative public intellectual of our time. She produces thorough, demanding studies on a variety of issues, all of which move toward matters of justice and human rights. She has an amazing capacity to think things down to the most telling detail and then to reframe the subject in terms of the critical rationality that is both her passion and her gift. Close reading of any of her demanding books is worth the effort—more rewarding than a host of lesser, easier reads.

In this book Nussbaum takes up the issue of violence in India between Hindus and Muslims, reconsidering the usual presuppositions about that quarrel, which lives always at the edge of fresh eruption. She begins by focusing on a dreadful accident on February 27, 2002, when a fire broke out on an overloaded passenger train. After a skirmish between Hindus on the train and Muslims on the platform, many Hindus were trapped in the burning cars, and 58 people, mostly Hindus, died. Nussbaum quotes a forensic expert who said, “These seven minutes set the future of India.” From that episode Nussbaum develops her argument in three waves.

First, she reports on four interviews with Hindu leaders, three of them from the Hindu right, which she holds responsible for the continuing political crisis. She concludes that the spokespersons for two Hindu right movements—Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which champions the rights of orthodox Hindus, and Vishva Hindu Parishad, which openly advocates violence against Muslims—are locked into an ideological frame of reference that is mistaken in its Manichean judgment about Muslims. The fourth interview presents a Hindu leader who eschews violence and advocates an open society that accepts the legitimacy of other groups, including Muslims.

Nussbaum concludes: “The clash between proponents of ethnoreligious homogeneity and proponents of a more inclusive and pluralistic type of citizenship is a clash between two types of people within a single society.” But then she adds, remarkably, “At the same time, this clash expresses tendencies that are present, at some level, within most human beings.”

The second consideration in the book is a reflection on the three great framers of India’s political culture, the mystical poet Rabindranath Tagore, independence leader Mohandas Gandhi and the first president of liberated India, Jawaharlal Nehru. While Nussbaum is able to see the flaws, failures and inadequacies of each of these

leaders, she judges that their primary contributions, and the sum of their efforts, was to create and make possible an open democracy that allows for important social differences.

After contrasting leaders on the Hindu right with advocates of open democracy, Nussbaum comments on the practical politics of India and the compelling ideologies that lie behind the politics. I find most interesting and cunning her argument that British colonialism created a widespread sense of a failed male self in the Hindu community—and that this is at the bottom of the energy of the Hindu right. The imperial practice of humiliation and contempt toward the Indians, she says, imposed a deep wound of shame upon Hindu males that now requires the assertion of domination wherever possible.

This deep sense of inadequacy has been translated into two spheres, Nussbaum contends. First, domination by Hindu males has been enacted in home and family:

Control over women's bodies . . . substituted for control over other aspects of daily life. . . . Self-respect that was injured in the daily encounter with the racial hierarchy of the outer world could be built up again by the experience of secure kingly domination in the sphere of the family. . . . The domination of women took an increasingly violent form, and the British indulged these expressions.

Second, the deep resentment against the British was transferred into deep hostility to Muslims:

We can begin now to see that Muslims function in a more complex way in the symbolic life of the Hindu right. On the one hand, Muslims are indeed, like the British, the hypermasculine dominators, whom a self-hating shame instructs Hindu males to emulate.

At the same time, however, Muslims also (unlike the British) symbolize sexuality run rampant, sexuality out of control, a flood or tide of sex and birth that threatens to drown the nations. . . . Muslims can function symbolically in this double way because they are at one and the same time a subordinate group whose growth is feared and . . . a remembered dominating presence, the ancestors of and handy surrogates for the British rulers who inflicted centuries of humiliation.

Muslims are assigned the role, in right-wing ideology, of a substitute group that is degraded and shameful so that violence against them can be deemed legitimate and appropriate. The violence perpetrated by the Hindu right thus is rooted in a failed sense of self and the need to purge what reminds of inadequacy. The urge to Hindu purity justifies violence in the way that purity regularly evokes violence.

The pivot point of Nussbaum's study is in the title word *clash*. The word is a deliberate reference to Samuel Huntington's notion of a clash between the Christian West and the Muslim world, a hypothesis that Nussbaum firmly rejects:

The real clash is not a civilizational one between "Islam" and "the West," but instead a clash within virtually all modern nations—between people who are prepared to live with others who are different, on terms of equal respect, and those who seek the protection of homogeneity, achieved through the domination of a single religious and ethnic tradition.

On the first page of the book she asserts regarding this clash within:

The thesis of this book is the Gandhian claim that the real struggle that democracy must wage is a struggle within the individual self, between the urge to dominate and defile the other and a willingness to live respectfully on terms of compassion and equality, with all the vulnerability that such a life entails.

And on her last page, she concludes:

The real "clash of civilizations" is not "out there," between admirable Westerners and Muslim zealots. It is here, within each person, as we oscillate uneasily between self-protective aggression and the ability to live in the world with others.

Between the first and last pages, the book is an exposition of how that clash is manifest in India specifically.

Readers in the U.S. will find our own social conflicts enormously illuminated by Nussbaum's reading of the Indian conflict. Indeed, she intends that Western readers will readily extrapolate from India to our culture. It turns out, in our case, that we are not simply red and blue, liberal and conservative; we are rather actors in a drama that negotiates between a deeply felt need for homogeneity and a readiness to live

generously with others unlike ourselves. Nussbaum's reframing of the issue of fearful anxiety reaches all the way into U.S. foreign policy, with our frightened preoccupation with Islam.

In civil society, given the nativism fed by rage radio, the question is whether social convention and social institutions can contain the deep fear. In the church the question is whether we can sustain the claims of the gospel without allowing them to be preempted by partisan ideology. The locus of this clash within each of us suggests that the pastoral task may be the healing, for the sake of common well-being, of the deep wounds, fear and anxiety that reach toward racial and ethnic minority groups, toward gays, and toward anyone who disturbs our precious equilibrium.

I have found this book to be redefining, and I suspect many other readers will as well. The juxtaposition of the words *clash* and *within* invites rethinking in every dimension of our common life. It turns out that cultural hegemony is too easy and yields too much comfort too soon. Nussbaum invites us to deeper self-awareness and to a recognition of the self-centeredness that too readily passes for virtue.