

Race & Class

<http://rac.sagepub.com>

Literacy and Conversion in the Discourse of Hindu Nationalism

Gauri Viswanathan

Race Class 2000; 42; 1

DOI: 10.1177/030639600128967983

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://rac.sagepub.com>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[Institute of Race Relations](http://www.instituteforrace.com)

Additional services and information for *Race & Class* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://rac.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://rac.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

GAURI VISWANATHAN

Literacy and conversion in the discourse of Hindu nationalism

In an otherwise cheerless and desultory year, euphoria seized India as it celebrated the award of the 1998 Nobel Prize to Amartya Sen for his work on welfare economics. The distinctiveness of this work lay in Sen's commitment to a concept of human development aimed at realising social and political processes for the betterment of human life. In insisting that all forms of human deprivation such as hunger, malnutrition and illiteracy should be brought within the purview of public policy, Sen transformed economics into a moral science, challenging the direction of a discipline focused primarily on those social aspects that are only instrumentally useful for human life. Among the deprivations he targets as most ignored by public policy is the citizenry's right to education, full access to which is still an unrealised goal in post-colonial India, despite the professed commitments to universal literacy. On hearing the news that Sen had won the Nobel Prize, even those on both the Left and the Right in India who had long questioned the pragmatic usefulness of his work suspended their scepticism and joined the rest of the country in lauding his achievement.

There was, however, a lone voice of dissent and disapproval, and it came from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the right-wing Hindu

Gauri Viswanathan is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. She is the author of *Masks of Conquest: literary study and British rule in India* (1989) and *Outside the Fold: conversion, modernity and belief* (1998), which has won a number of prizes, including the James Russell Lowell Prize awarded by the Modern Language Association of America.

Race & Class

Copyright © 2000 Institute of Race Relations

Vol. 42(1): 1–20 [0306-3968(200007)42:1; 1–20; 013794]

religious organisation currently backing the ruling BJP government. VHP president Ashok Singhal gave a sinister turn to Sen's economic programme, darkly interpreting his Nobel award as a western conspiracy to promote literacy in developing societies in order to bring them within the ultimate pale of a global Christian order and thus 'wipe out Hinduism from this country'.¹ 'Despite the accuracy of Prof. Amartya Sen's conclusions', he charged, 'the same could prove harmful to Hindu society as Christians would be bringing in more money ostensibly for promoting education, but actually proselytisation would increase and everything in India would be undermined.'²

Incidentally, Ashok Singhal had earlier launched a scathing attack on Mother Teresa's Nobel Prize as well. Then, too, he accused the Nobel committee of rewarding only those who promoted the work of Christian charity. Sceptical of Mother Teresa's work as properly deserving to be called social service, he insisted that the driving aim behind all the activities of the Missionaries of Charity was to convert poor and ignorant Hindus to Christianity. At that time, unlike the occasion of Sen's prize, Singhal's voice was joined by others, though admittedly not in huge numbers. Publicly, at least, few cared to endorse his views on Sen, as a result of which he was isolated from other hardliners in his own party. Even the prime minister of the BJP-led government, Atal Behari Vajpayee, denounced such provocations as churlish, intemperate and irresponsible.³

Yet, even as he refused to participate in Singhal's denunciation of Sen's award, the prime minister simultaneously urged that there be a 'national debate on conversion' following the attacks on Christians and their places of worship since December 1998. As if in repetition of the horrendous violence of 6 December 1992, which resulted in the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Hindu extremists, Christian churches were razed to the ground and, in a series of particularly gruesome events, a Christian missionary and his sons were burned alive and, most recently, in September 1999, a nun was stripped and forced to drink the urine of her would-be rapists.⁴ Ostensibly a response to Christian proselytisation, the violence began in the western state of Gujarat, but spread to other states as well, including the eastern state of Orissa, which witnessed not only the burning alive of the Australian missionary Graham Staines but also the murder of a Roman Catholic priest, Arul Das, in September 1999. To a country that had come to expect communal clashes as a conflict involving Hindus and Muslims primarily, the sudden surge of hostility towards Christians took many Indians by surprise, accustomed as they had become to the central role of Christian mission schools and hospitals in Indian life. In this context, Vajpayee's appeal sounds innocuous enough, outwardly a sincere attempt to engage in serious dialogue and discussion about the motive force behind the violence.

The Constitution and conversion

However, the call for a debate was clearly intended to reopen the discussions that took place at the time of Indian independence, when the Constitution was framed. In the Constituent Assembly discussions held between 1946 and 1950, there was a strong move by powerful Hindu lobbies to ban conversions altogether. The call for constitutional provisions against conversion was made in response to the widespread fear that Hinduism, typically described as a non-proselytising religion, would be under threat and its numerical strength diminished if conversions to other religions were allowed. While all religious groups may, theoretically, disseminate their beliefs, it has been a long-standing belief among Hindus that only Christians and Muslims actively proselytise, placing Hinduism at a disadvantage. This conviction lay behind the attempt by the Hindu lobby to bar conversions altogether and achieve a level playing field among the various religions. Furthermore, Gandhi's famous distrust of Christian missionaries and Christian conversions offered a screen behind which the anti-Christian lobby could conveniently hide.⁵ The fear of conversion produced a strange marriage between Gandhi and the Hindu nationalists who, in all other instances, denounced him for making concessions to Muslims but nonetheless heralded him as the voice of reason when he opposed Christian proselytisation. In his deep scepticism about the work of missionisation, Gandhi imbued Indian nationalism with a Hindu ethos that laid the groundwork for an identitarian notion of Indian-ness. His resistance to Christian conversions simultaneously affirmed a Hindu past which had the power to assimilate different communities and produce a sense of oneness. Of course, the vital difference between Gandhi's position and that of Hindu nationalists was that, while he believed Christian conversions were the instrument of British colonialism and must therefore be resisted as vigorously as British rule, Hindu groups had no such larger aim and remained trapped within their own self-interests.

The final draft of the Indian Constitution effectively resisted all such attempts to outlaw conversions and instead made the propagation of religion permissible under the law. Article 25 (1) of the Constitution gives everyone the fundamental right to 'profess, practise, or propagate religion', a right that is only circumscribed by considerations of 'public order, morality, and health'.⁶ Whereas the constitutional freedom of conscience is described as a mental process, the right to propagate religion externalises the mental freedom of conscience, rendering active propagation a field of open and lawful endeavour.⁷ Freedom of conscience was thus broadly interpreted to mean the right not only to *choose* one's religious views but also to *disseminate* them. Not until 1977 was this provision modified in an Indian Supreme Court ruling

which specified that the right to propagate religion did not necessarily extend to the right to convert. The ruling further allowed states to legislate 'freedom of religion' bills forbidding the conversion of minors, as well as requiring Hindus converting to Christianity to provide magistrates with an affidavit. Such forms of legislation brought civil officials directly into the administration of spiritual affairs, a move that seriously qualified the secular conception of the modern state and challenged the tacitly accepted divisions between religious faith and law.

The impetus for the Supreme Court judgement came from a series of rulings set in motion by the findings and recommendations of a pivotal commission chaired by Justice Niyogi. Set up in 1954 to investigate the role of foreign missionaries in the state of Madhya Pradesh (located in the geographical centre of India), the Niyogi Commission produced a report that, in the eyes of many missionaries, was intended to regulate Christian conversions and drive foreign missions out of the country.⁸ Noting that the term 'propagation' was originally intended to refer to freedom of expression and conscience, Niyogi's report implied that conversion militated against such freedom and therefore could not be regarded as the disinterested dissemination of religious knowledge. By calling for a constitutional amendment reserving to Indian citizens the right to propagate religion, the report showed that it was clearly generated in a climate of chauvinism and ultra-nationalism. But the report went further than merely reopening the constitutional debates on conversion, just as prime minister Vajpayee, in calling for a national debate on conversion, had more than an academic exchange in mind. The Niyogi report introduced a new argument by highlighting loss of control over free will through weakness, ignorance and poverty as a reason for outlawing conversion altogether, since it left the economically deprived sectors of Indian society particularly vulnerable to the inducements of converting to another religion. Such a view was made possible only by representing India's economically weaker sections as essentially disabled, incapable of distinguishing motives and inexperienced in the exercise of their own judgement. The report painted a picture of conversion as a form of exploitation threatening the integrity of the Indian state, an assault so heinous that it justified the state's curbing of missionary activities on the grounds that they posed a danger to national unity. Conversion is construed as a form of mental violence, no less severe than bodily assault. The Niyogi Commission's landmark report set the lines of an argument that have continued to the present day, blurring the boundaries between force and consent and giving very little credence to the possibility that converts change over to another religion because they choose to. Interestingly, in charging that Christian missionaries take advantage of the weakened will of the poor and the disenfranchised, the report confirmed an elitist

view of free will and autonomy as the privileges of the economically advantaged classes. As in the fiery age-of-consent debates over the prepubertal marriages of females, 'consent' is not allowed as an option among the poor, and the missionaries' promise of new religious possibilities is construed entirely as a violation akin to the rape of women.

Over the years, the ambiguity in the semantic distinctions between 'propagation' and 'conversion' went a long way to creating the charged environment culminating in such incidents as the fractious ones in Gujarat in December 1998, when scores of Christians and Christian places of worship were attacked. Indeed, the mounting violence against Christians since late 1998 replays an ongoing battle between Christian missionisation and Hindu nationalism which was often fought in the houses of the Indian Parliament to introduce legislation banning conversion. So-called 'freedom of religion' bills were routinely proposed, seeking the extension of state protection to those being wooed away from their religion. 'Freedom of religion' came to be a euphemism for freedom *from* religion.

Ostensibly secular in motivation, the bills to ensure freedom of religious conscience were primarily intended to protect Hinduism against the incursions of other proselytising religions, revealing the collusion of the state in the preservation of Hinduism. 'Conversion' implies force, a radical take-over of people's will, whereas 'propagation' acquires a more intransitive connotation, a middle term between force and instruction. Slipping from one meaning to another in the recent debate on conversion, the VHP general-secretary Praveen Togadia invoked comparative history in order to argue that no other society gave a free rein to conversion, which has never been able to escape the connotations of force and disruption. Seeking a universalist point of reference, he linked economic well-being with free will to argue that 'if these are the views of even the developed countries, how can we allow conversion in India where a large section of the society is poor and illiterate'.⁹ Here again is the evocation of poverty as mental disability, leaving the masses peculiarly vulnerable to religious manipulation. In rehearsing the earlier constitutional debates on conversion, Togadia failed to mention that the constitutional framers invoked western precedent, particularly that of American freedom of conscience, when they decided to include provisions to permit propagation of religion. Selectively calling up the West as a reference point to argue against conversion, Togadia's comparative perspective evidently breaks down in its inability to deal with the multiple genealogies of religious freedom comprising the constitutional debates. These genealogies make room for the notion of conversion as a matter of individual choice and conscience, which the Constitution was obliged to protect.

Conversion and the historical legacy of conquest

Yet, despite such constitutional protection of religious conscience, nationalist discourse has turned conversion into a threat, a challenge to the cohesiveness of tightly woven communities. This is not difficult to understand, given that nationalism's recourse to concepts of ethnicity, race, religion and language is precisely what conversion contests. Conversion's interest for a post-nationalist culture is its resistance to positivist ways of conceptualising difference through such essentialising markers as race, religion, colour, ethnicity and nationality. When identity is destabilised by boundaries that are so porous that movement from one world view to another can take place with the regularity of actual border crossings, a challenge is posed to the fixed categories that act as an empirical grid for interpreting human behaviour and actions. While terms like hybridity are offered as an alternative to essentialising identities, hybridity does not capture the dynamism of movement signified by conversion, which regards cross-overs of identity not merely as items of exchange or even fusion but as a remaking of the categories that define identity. Nor is syncretism a satisfactory term to describe the overlapping of identities since, as its etymology and historical usage indicate, it constitutes a blurring, rather than a negotiation, of differences.¹⁰ Moreover, syncretism is as much a construct as are terms like 'tradition' and 'modernity'.

In destabilising the determinants of race, religion, gender and so on, conversion unsettles the understanding of difference through purely essentialist categories. It shifts the focus away from visible markers of difference (such as race or gender) to the distance in viewpoints emerging from the pragmatics of communication. Such gaps in communication are the starting point for conversion's reconstructive role in initiating movement between opposing viewpoints. The fact that neither origin nor destination is finite and determinate allows the convert to be critical of the religion to which she converts, even as she seeks to reform the religion she has repudiated. This sense of critical distance and fluidity gives conversion its peculiar power – the power to destabilise which belongs to the individual who moves incessantly between disparate viewpoints.

I am, therefore, suggesting that conversion performs the epistemological function of negotiating differences in viewpoints. Yet historically the term 'conversion' has been associated with violence and erasure rather than mobility and communication. To those who patrol the barriers around religion, conversion rudely shuts down communication and is forcible by definition; it is 'a colonisation of consciousness'.¹¹ Violence is at its core, as it tears away the secure lineaments of identity and orders the extinction of an individual's most innate beliefs and understandings. Even when conversion works

by persuasion, it is no less coercive in that it leaves the individual vulnerable to alluring promises. This is violence of the most hateful kind, because it induces assent by planting the seeds of hope for a better life. The legacy of historical conquest has made this notion of conversion a palpable and uncontested one, even though violence does not inhere in conversion but, rather, in the historical moment in which conversion occurs. Indeed, when examined as a form of intersubjective communication, conversion can be understood as the outcome of a process whose alternative end point is violence, especially when the differences between parties remain unresolved.¹²

Coercion, erasure of identity and forced assimilation are embedded in colonial desire, which has assigned conversion a set of meanings rooted in violence. Yet the fact remains that conversion becomes violent only when shifts to another world view turn into a desire to make it prevail. This, of course, is Matthew Arnold's classic definition of culture, which is deeply rooted in the logic of conversion by virtue of its ambition to be expansive and all-embracing. Translating the spread of culture into the terms of religious expansion, Robert Hefner describes conversion as a 'great transformation' that assimilates local cults into world religions. This description, however, can be parsed further to reveal an inherent tension in conversion between being a break in the continuity of knowledge *and* representing a prelude to the institutionalisation of new knowledge systems. What appears as a violent erasure of identity – epistemic violence, in Gayatri Spivak's term – is more precisely an effect of discontinuous knowledge. But while, on one hand, discontinuity of knowledge makes universalist propositions more difficult to sustain, on the other, the very presence of competing systems creates a different set of compulsions leading towards violence. In the first instance, discontinuity prevents false universalisms but, in the second, the desire to make the new system prevail reintroduces universalism. Violence is contingent upon the latter, but it also signifies the implacable opposition of claims. Not only does violence symbolise the disruptive power of difference, it also preserves and reproduces it. The history of religious transformations cannot be written outside the framework of these dual impulses: of knowledge interrupted and then transformed from dissent into assent.¹³

Discontinuity and radical pluralism make culture vulnerable to what Habermas terms legitimation crises. Such crises reveal the need for a theory of religious communication that moves beyond relativism, even as it repudiates universalism in values. Some critics prefer to look towards notions of faith as the 'establishment of a ground or foundation immune to the relativizing powers of Enlightenment and providing, thereby, a basis for the legitimation of belief'.¹⁴ Conversion's proactive nature, combined with its manoeuvring between

discrepant belief systems, makes it a powerful epistemological tool to face the broad challenges of a pluralistic society.

If pluralism is not to be reduced to a slogan of 'live and let live' but imagined as the groundwork of community, communication between disparate groups on lines other than the assertion of their separate identities is the first step towards that goal. Conversion highlights the crisis of pluralism as the absence of a point of reference for religious groups to negotiate their differences and conflicting needs. Religious absolutism sets up a single centre of values as the ultimate arbiter in conflicts, overriding individual self-definitions. On the other hand, while constitutional provisions for freedom of religion relativise religious difference and thus repudiate the exclusionary force of doctrine, they leave nothing in its place to enable religious communication between groups. To a large extent, this is the dilemma of secularising societies. The failure of relativism enables the return of conversion in post-emancipation society, not as forcible assimilation but as intersubjective communication.¹⁵ In its challenge to thwart the violence that results when groups interact as equal but competing members of civil society, pluralism's real test is to find new philosophical ways of conceiving relationality, particularly to heal the wounds inflicted by restrictive laws on communities in the colonial past of societies. Kept out of full civic participation in the past, communities are robbed of the conditions to relate effectively with one another, especially when consensus in civil decision making is thwarted by the historical baggage of colonialism, which includes the perception that colonial rule was intended to obliterate indigenous religions. However, other than to sanction freedom of religious conscience, the constitutional protection of the right to propagate religions does nothing to establish new conditions for communication or promote the proactive exercise of tolerance, even though civil pluralism forces communities to rethink their relations with each other on principles other than that of religious difference.

The role of the mission schools

The perceived threat posed by conversion reminds one that, for formerly colonised societies, the history of colonial education is also the founding moment of violence. This conviction underwrites Indian prime minister Vajpayee's call for a national debate on conversion. In so doing, he insists on revisiting the role of missionary institutions in India: to ask, in other words, whether their aim was to propagate religion – which could also broadly include morality, civic virtue and character – or convert people to Christianity. Without attacking the Constitution itself, Vajpayee asserted that, while the right of religious propagation was constitutionally guaranteed, 'the country must ensure

that it is not misused'.¹⁶ This statement is no less than a dire warning to those who would use constitutional provisions as a licence to apply force. 'Poverty cannot be a reason for conversion', warned Vajpayee, firmly dissociating economic circumstances from the imperatives of religious change. Regardless of his own disapproval of Singhal's attack on Amartya Sen, Vajpayee kept the two issues of Christianisation and welfare economics squarely within the same frame of reference, however much he may have denied that there was any connection between the two. It is thus no coincidence that Amartya Sen was denounced for advocating basic education – and religious conversion by extension – at the same time that Christianity was under siege in south Gujarat for promoting tribal conversions. In being forcibly linked with conversion, literacy is disengaged from development issues and relocated as an exclusively religious issue. In an effort to reclaim literacy from Christian uses, Sen's critics pointed to what is now a consistent thematic of anti-missionary resistance: literacy has legitimacy only when it is a marker of indigenous cultural identity. Either way, the development issue drops out of the picture.

The public repudiation of Singhal's viewpoint, however, does not mean that his is an aberrant one, the voice of the lunatic fringe unable to make a dent on mainstream opinion. On the contrary, India's history of colonial education provided a real context for the deep suspicion cast upon the Nobel Prize committee's recommendations. That this context was exploited to detach literacy from issues of social reform is perhaps one of the dimensions of the conversion controversy that needs more analysis and clarification than it has received. Views such as those held by Ashok Singhal have been sustained over time and buttressed by references to India's colonial history. The deep distrust of missionary institutions has a colonial past, providing Hindu nationalists with a much-needed moral stance to defend Indian religion and culture. (The collapsing of 'Hinduism' and 'India' is not the least of the rhetorical slippages.) It is well known that Christian missionaries were attacked long before the BJP and the VHP came on the scene. Hinduism put up a stiff resistance to Christianity on both an organisational and a theological level.¹⁷ Richard Fox Young has meticulously documented the development of a whole tradition of anti-Christian polemics in nineteenth-century India focused on a refutation of Christian doctrine, point by point.¹⁸

There is nothing new in the Hindu antagonism to missionary schools as hotbeds of conversion activity ('wolves in sheep's clothing', as they were often called).¹⁹ Opposition to literacy reform has long been motivated by fear that its ultimate intent is religious change, although why Sen's research would benefit Christians more than any other group is never clear in the VHP attacks on him. But it is telling that one of its chief complaints is that the Nobel Prize has never been awarded to

social activists like Gandhi or Baba Amte who had both worked tirelessly for the uplift of the poor and other marginalised sections of society.²⁰ Yet social activism in India, even that practised by a Gandhi or an Amte, has never been totally removed from a related compulsive desire to contest the reach of Christian missionaries, particularly in tribal and outlying areas. In regions where lower castes and outcastes were denied the educational facilities open to higher caste groups, missionaries often stepped in to fill a social vacuum.²¹ In the light of caste tensions, it is easy to see why social reform has been as strongly contested as conversion itself. Neither can be separated from a colonial history that continues to inform attitudes to an ethics of improvement, the content of which, to many today, is still indistinguishable from the *mission civilisatrice*. This is by no means to justify the crudest premises of cultural nationalism, but we are obliged to acknowledge the complex historical formations driving nationalists to the depths of paranoia and suspicion.

Historically, missionary schools opened their doors to socially excluded groups, while the schools run by the colonial government had as their main clientele students from the upper castes. Yet this division so heavily reinforced the caste structure that it appeared as if the very form and spirit of colonial education was driven by caste feeling. There was more complacency than truth in colonial administrators' belief that English studies altered attitudes to caste. The Serampore missionary John Marshman wryly observed that: 'I am not certain that a man's being able to read Milton and Shakespeare, or understand Dr Johnson, would make him less susceptible of the honour of being a Brahmin'.²² The association of missionary schools with vernacular education and the government schools with English education marked the differential development of languages and literary instruction.²³ Yet, precisely because missionary schools were so closely identified with lower-caste education, missionaries found their aims compromised by their desire to lure the upper castes to their schools, if only to extend the range of Christian influence. Partly this was motivated by their fear that, by attracting only 'the most despised and least numerous of society', they were creating a new virulent strain in Indian society, 'a new class superior to the rest in useful knowledge, but hated and despised by the castes to whom their new attainments would always induce us to prefer them'.²⁴ Caste lines being as implacable as they were, missionaries dreaded that the huge efforts they expended on the education of the lower castes would remain confined to these groups and not spread further. Recognising that the reform of Hindu society was impossible without involving all castes, they modified their instructional objectives, expanding their curricular offerings to include English literature alongside the vernaculars. In time, the lines

between missionary and government schools blurred as both types of institutions competed for students from the upper castes.

Interestingly, the work of vernacular education started by missionaries was taken up by Hindu reformist organisations, such as the Ramakrishna Mission and the Arya Samaj. The linguistic stratification was so rigid that the vernacular schools produced a militant brand of youth who pledged themselves to the preservation of Hindu culture, religion and language against the encroachments of an English-educated, westernised elite. So it is somewhat ironic that this form of cultural nationalism developed as a consequence of the vernacular missionary schools and the so-called government schools switching their linguistic orientation, with the former increasingly moving towards English instruction primarily and the latter now having virtually become vernacular-medium schools. The development has also inspired the defenders of Hinduism to view the English press, which covered the atrocities against Christians in the past year extensively, as a key player in the drama of linguistic, religious and caste stratification, its corps of writers having themselves often been educated in Christian mission schools. Therefore, while the English language newspapers have gone a long way in bringing the violence against Christians to public attention, they have also been attacked by Hindu nationalists as complicit with the work of Christian missionaries in propagating an alien culture.

Historically, in seeking to break out of narrow caste identification, the missionary schools set in motion a number of significant developments. The original objectives of imparting basic literacy skills were considerably qualified by a new infusion of literary content. If missionary schools initially sought to remedy the exclusionary effects of caste prejudice by offering educational opportunities denied to lower castes, their turn to an English course of studies took them in a markedly different direction. That conversion rather than caste or poverty relief more often engaged their interest is evident from the perfection of certain pedagogical techniques to produce belief. Catechism and hermeneutics are prominent among these. The Word offered access to the world, but it also opened up access to faith through the power of imagination. Education in imagery supplemented, and in time surpassed, instruction in the fundamentals of literacy. In all its clarity and brilliance, imagery pointed the way to the Bible; to the power of arguments, reasons and demonstrations vividly impressing themselves on the mind; to an experience of truth that could only be known when seen and felt. To missionaries aware of the hostility that direct Christian instruction might produce, there was no better way to convey the deep swell of religious feeling than through the rich tapestry of images, sensations and impressions found in the best of English Romantic writers like Wordsworth, Cowper and Young.

These alternating instructional objectives in missionary institutions kept the pendulum swinging between poverty and caste relief, on the one hand, and conversion, on the other. Let us recall Vajpayee's admonition that 'poverty cannot be a reason for conversion'. He was far closer to the course of colonial history than he may have realised, for institutional developments suggest a complex evolution of conversion motives not always directly related to economic circumstances. The violence against Christians in Gujarat and elsewhere since late 1998 was caused by the perception that missionaries were targeting poor tribals to convert them to Christianity, often by imparting literacy skills to them. Radical Hindu groups interpret Christian conversion as an inducement, an enticing avenue of escape from grinding poverty. But conversion is just as importantly involved in the constructions of new selves, and it is this shift from the ground of economics to that of culture that continues to alarm Hindu opponents, perhaps even more than the threat of religious change. Their will is steeled, therefore, to reclaim culture as the ultimate goal of all future attempts at literacy reform.

Religions assign different functions for reading and writing. In religions of revelation, the word is the Word. Hinduism's self-description as a non-proselytising religion has also meant that it conceives of reading and writing in different ways. One point of difference is the creation and affirmation of community. This does not necessarily mean an interpretive community, however, but a community marked by systems of inclusion and exclusion, which are in turn determined by criteria of purity and pollution. Verbal acts are modes of community affirmation as much as they are forms of communication. But where the use of language signals the expression of faith in a supreme being, religions that employ such language open up the new possibility that language can cause changes in one's conceptions of divinity. Are these then proselytising religions? It can be argued that Hinduism establishes a relation between literacy and faith different from that of Christianity and Islam. If, as is maintained about Hinduism, faith does not lie in words, then a Hindu can have access to the world without the mediation of language. Language, however, is threatening when it is tied to faith. Literacy arouses suspicion because it can alter faith by providing a different form of access to the world. Access to language is essential for economic betterment, yet it also contains the potential to introduce world views at variance with those affirmed by the community. The conflicting perspectives on literacy throw open the divide between economics and culture, which further translates into artificial distinctions between religions on the basis of whether they proselytise or not.

Ironically, the VHP leaders who attacked the Christian conversions of illiterate tribals do not accept that literacy can also be a defence against forcible conversions of any kind, Christian, Hindu, Muslim

or any other religion. Their unquestioned assumption is that illiteracy is gullibility. But if the opposite is also true – that literacy is scepticism and critical judgement – then the threat posed by the lure of other faiths should be diminished. The Word may be the source of faith, but it is also the maker of selfhood and independent judgement. However, the rhetoric of the VHP suppresses this fundamental understanding of literacy's role which, in offering the tools of knowledge, discrimination and evaluation, shapes the modern self. We are led to inquire whether literacy as self-making, independence and private judgement poses the real threat, an unnamed one perhaps, acknowledged only as a tool of Christianisation but not of Hindu modernity.

Literacy, economics and the culture of conversion

At this point I want to return to Amartya Sen and his Nobel Prize for economics. We may now place Ashok Singhal's diatribe in the framework of a perceived shift in literacy's address from economics to culture. That is why no matter how much of a *non sequitur* his comments may appear, his view that Sen's mass literacy would benefit only Christians reflects how definitively culture, not economics, has become the contested ground for discussions of development issues. In part, this shift has strategic uses for a government seeking to deflect attention from the dismal failure of *swadeshi* (self-sufficient) economics, despite the BJP's campaigning for power on this issue. And, as its economic policies have met with one disaster after another, the BJP has needed to keep economics out of public discussion. Religion has always been its surrogate theme, and it is not surprising that turning even literacy into a conversion issue offsets the government's dismal showing on the economic front. But apart from turning the focus away from a string of economic failures, the perception that mass literacy is a tool of cultural imperialism undermines the developmental rhetoric of secular progress that literacy reform also tends to generate. Singhal's denunciation of Amartya Sen reflects attitudes towards literacy that are part of an ongoing tension between development priorities and cultural purity.

By objecting to literacy as a missionary-inspired practice, do Hindus really want to say they object to the introduction of social benefits to the people? Most would probably say no, but the ethics of social reform has been challenged in mounting anti-Christian rhetoric since the BJP assumed power in early 1998. It can, and should, be argued that if missionaries give people services they would otherwise not have had, no one has a right to restrict their activities, particularly when there are no other state-supported or private initiatives. After all, missionaries do not have a monopoly on the opening of new schools and hospitals, and there is nothing to stop Hindus or any other group

from doing likewise. But the cumulative effect of the attack on Christianity has been a fierce questioning of whether social benefits can ensue at the cost of religious and cultural integrity. This is nothing less than an anti-Orientalist response to a condition sewn into Indian history through the reformist ideology of British colonialism. Its corollary is that social reform has, and always will be, politicised in post-colonial India. The view that social service has a national or a religious identity suggests that no act of reform or service can take place in postcolonial India without its being measured against a corresponding degradation of Hindu customs and rituals in the process.

But I think there is something fundamentally more worrying in the anti-literacy, anti-conversion posture of the VHP. The numbers of Hindus who actually converted to Christianity are far less than the numbers of those who detached themselves from Hinduism over time and affiliated themselves to more secular conceptions of modernity. Today we call the latter group 'secular Indians', though that term has its own problems. The main difference between these two groups of Hindus is that the former have converted to Christianity and the latter to modernity. The mechanism is the same, even though the characterisation may be different. Critics will argue that this was the effect of mission-school education on the middle classes. But there are deeper issues involved. Hinduism is once again at the crossroads of change. Instead of attending to the problems of overwhelming illiteracy, caste and gender discrimination, and poverty, the most extreme among the Hindu nationalists have narrowed their agenda to attack other groups – notably Muslims and Christians – for the erosion of cultural traditions. India's struggle to keep pace with a changing world is most pronounced in a stagnant educational system which, while professing secularism, is still caught up in the forms and practices of a religious culture. Is the desire to interrogate mass literacy ultimately a desire to renounce the modern world altogether? Is the quest for cultural integrity so supreme that it creates a longing in Hindus to supplant modernity with a more reassuring past in which their traditions are uncorrupted? These are difficult questions, but they go to the heart of the resistance to literacy as a development issue and the antagonism to conversion in general.

Significantly, even as some Hindus recoil from the demands of modernity, at another level they are reclaiming literacy as a hallmark of Hinduism's cultural past. Indeed, when literacy performs the work of culture in Hinduism, it is assigned an economic role denied in the work of missionary schools. In the context of an ancient past, literacy extends beyond reading and writing to encompass a range of technical and vocational skills. This is illustrated in the comments of Vajpayee and other government figures on indigenous technical education. On a trip to the southern city of Mysore, Vajpayee lauded the work

of Basaveshwara, a social reformer who made significant efforts in educating the masses while also promoting women's education. Vajpayee pointed to the Veerashaiva *mutts* as ideal service institutions providing training for literacy – training that the government ought to provide but did not. The Veerashaiva *mutts*, he further added, were the only institutions serving society over a long period of time with the same missionary zeal as Christian educational institutions.²⁵ As if on cue in a musical duet, the state chief minister who hosted him glorified the work of institutions like the JSS Mahavidyaapeetha, saying that they were providing opportunities for the disabled and the disenfranchised to become useful citizens. Significantly, both political figures consider the indigenous schools important because they are first and foremost technical training institutes. The vocational training offered in these indigenous institutions becomes that site of difference turning basic literacy into a colonised space, a zone of foreign domination.

Conflicting approaches to developmentalism underscore a deep ambivalence about literacy that has remained unresolved since the framing of the Indian Constitution. Amartya Sen reopened the old debates about rights versus directives when he released the Public Report on Basic Education (PROBE) on 1 January 1999. The PROBE report is described as 'a people's report' on school education. Prepared by a team of independent academics and social activists, it set out to counter the prevalent official myths about Indian schooling. The report claims to be the first attempt of its kind to examine the condition of India's elementary education from the standpoint of the underprivileged. It demolishes a set of ruling myths that have guided Indian education since the country's independence, among which are, first, that poor parents are not interested in sending their children to school; second, that child labour is the main obstacle to school attendance and therefore to universal literacy; and, third, that elementary education is free. Most importantly, the report attempted to clarify the links between child labour and schooling by showing that, far from being unable to go to school because they have to work, full-time child labourers often work because they have dropped out of school, typically for family reasons.²⁶ Amartya Sen has argued against this form of educational deprivation for a long time, noting with chagrin that 'child labour is considered perfectly acceptable for the boys and girls of poor families, while the privileged classes enjoy a massively subsidized system of higher education'.²⁷

Encouraged by the report's conclusion that, contrary to popular perception, education remains sought after even by the most economically disadvantaged sections of society, Sen declared that the time for demanding elementary education as a fundamental right had arrived. Simultaneously, he unveiled his plans to set up a charitable trust with the Nobel money for the development of education and health in India

and Bangladesh.²⁸ Stressing the West's economic progress as a function of its planned development of human resources, Sen spoke persuasively of how the general availability of elementary education would enhance a sense of citizens' participation in India's overall economic expansion. He sounded a theme that placed the economic imperatives of educational growth in the perspective of social choice theory. Economic advantages, he appeared to suggest, were the fruit of participatory democracy whose foundations rested on basic literacy.²⁹

Education as a right

If, then, literacy is the chief basis of economic development and social change, education as a fundamental right has still remained largely undefined in the Indian Constitution. On the other hand, Articles 25 and 26, comprising the section on fundamental rights, were careful to give 'every religious denomination' the right to propagate religion and maintain religious institutions. Constituent Assembly discussions struggled to untangle the contradiction between the secular goals of Indian democracy and the permission granted to religious groups to practise (and preach) their religious philosophies in their own institutions. Article 30 addresses educational rights, but is less interested in universalising education than in providing for the rights of minorities to maintain their own educational institutions and have full control over curricular content. The right-to-education needs of citizens still remain largely undefined. Vajpayee acknowledged the continued failure of his own government to address educational needs, uttering in a moment of utter candour, 'We pray to Saraswati [the Hindu goddess of learning] but make no arrangements to educate our children'.³⁰ Hence his admiration for the efforts of non-governmental institutions like the Veerashaiva *mutts* or the Mahavidyapeetha for doing what the government was obliged to do, but failed. Unable to invest adequately in education, the Indian government has appeared to be resigned to the possibility of non-governmental organisations taking the initiative. Yet social strife results when religious groups (operating as parallel NGOs) undertake the work of education, often work that is considered disruptive of another religious tradition. And, in order to resolve conflicts of such a nature, the state is required to intervene, even though it prefers to leave educational initiatives to non-governmental organisations. This contradiction remains at the core of the state's fraught relation with the education of its citizens.

By proposing universal education as a fundamental right, Amartya Sen has called for alternative ways to rethink 'inconsistencies of means and ends', by which he means the present arbitrary distribution of resources and the uncertain division of labour between government and non-governmental (minority) agencies.³¹ To be sure, he is less

forthcoming about the sources of investment in education, for it is never entirely clear whether he would be willing to settle for an education funded by non-governmental agencies to supplement government funding. To some extent, this uncertainty has augmented the deep anxiety of his opponents that groups seeking to propagate their own beliefs – such as Christian missionaries – would seize the momentum for educational change. But Sen's most important intervention is in shifting freedom away from a concept that denotes a community's right to practise and propagate its beliefs. Rather, freedom for him is the creation of conditions for the wholesome participation of citizens in the democratic process. Universal literacy is the key to this process. As the instrument for securing the representation of people belonging to the unorganised sector, universal primary education is more than an entrée into people's participation in their economic advancement. By enacting democracy, it confers a reality on participatory processes that Indian democracy still lacks, despite its adult suffrage.

At the same time, Amartya Sen has been careful not to make freedom an all-encompassing category overriding goals of equality, such that one person's freedom becomes another's unfreedom. His suspicion of freedom as an unqualified term leads him to argue that the freedom accruing from a market economy is attended by far too many dangers of inequality and poverty stemming from the market.³² Instead, he proposes five kinds of freedom: (1) enabling freedom, which signifies that each individual is able to participate in social and economic activities, and that the quality of life is improved through education and health facilities; (2) political freedom, which invariably involves democracy and civil rights; (3) economic freedom, which involves transactions and the market, and could thus promote efficiency and equity; (4) transparency freedom, which encompasses a person's right to know that he or she is not being cheated in a transaction; and (5) protective freedom, which is freedom from droughts, floods, famine. These freedoms are important insofar as they constitute the legitimate end of development.³³

Thus, for Sen, literacy is not exclusively an economic issue, as some commentators believe. His notion of freedom encompasses culture – the kind of life we would like to lead – as an essential goal of development.³⁴ What his critic Ashok Singhal evidently feared was that culture would be made synonymous with social choice and, to that extent, Amartya Sen's notion of freedom uncannily confirmed his anxiety that development had a Christian trajectory. Singhal obviously got the story wrong in most of the particulars. But, on the subject of choice, Sen offered a new set of questions that could potentially have more bearing on how individuals construe selfhood, as opposed to being affirmed by their community, and it is this move that set the alarm bells ringing for Singhal. Instead of asking the old

question, 'Is it possible to have socially rational decisions based on the interests and preferences of the members of the society?', Sen proposed asking, 'Which of the various ways of equity and justice are most relevant?' The choice, he suggests, is between different ways of evaluation whose ultimate validity is that they draw upon foundational notions of justice and fairness. Even the apparently scientific subject of choosing a suitable measure of poverty for a nation or a state can be approached in terms of the competing values reflected in different ways by distinct statistical measures. Because welfare economics and social choice theory link knowledge with practice, their operative premise is that self-construction is national construction. So, even though economic development has merged into an issue of culture in the rhetoric of the postcolonial state, driven by its own sense of cultural nationalism, the question of choice is deliberately suspended. Where it does appear, it is turned into proof of forcible conversion.

References

- 1 'Sangh Parivar comes under fire', *The Hindu* (Madras, 29 December 1998), p. 13.
- 2 'Singhal statement on Amartya Sen misquoted', *The Hindu* (3 January 1999), p. 7.
- 3 'Vajpayee criticises VHP remarks on Christians', *The Hindu* (31 December 1998), p. 1.
- 4 The nun claimed in her police report that her assailants queried her about the number of conversions her convent brought about, while also warning her that the killings, rapes, and kidnappings would continue as long as the Christian missions engaged in proselytisation ('Nun's assailants untraced', *The Hindu* (25 September 1999), p. 1). Three weeks earlier a Roman Catholic priest was murdered in Orissa.
- 5 See M. K. Gandhi, *My Experiments with Truth* (1929; reprinted Boston, MA, Beacon Press, 1957), pp. 122–5.
- 6 Ministry of Law, Justice and Company Affairs, Government of India, *The Constitution of India (as modified up to 1 August, 1977)*, p. 14.
- 7 M.M. Singh, *The Constitution of India: studies in perspective* (Calcutta, World Press, 1975), p. 480.
- 8 Andrew Wingate, *The Church and Conversion* (Delhi, Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1997), p. 35.
- 9 'VHP charge against Sonia Gandhi', *The Hindu* (9 January 1999), p. 13.
- 10 Gauri Viswanathan, 'Beyond Orientalism: syncretism and the politics of knowledge', *Stanford Humanities Review* (Vol. 5, no. 1, 1995) pp. 18–32.
- 11 Robert W. Hefner, 'World building and the rationality of conversion', in Robert W. Hefner (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity: historical and anthropological perspectives on a great transformation* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993), p. 5.
- 12 David J. Krieger, 'Conversion: on the possibility of global thinking in an age of particularism', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Vol. 63, no. 2, 1990), p. 238.
- 13 It was John Henry Newman's special contribution to reverse the institutionalisation of assent and produce a grammar of dissent. His major philosophical treatise, *A Grammar of Assent*, bears an ironic title in that, in order to arrive at an affirmation of faith, the knowing believer must proceed through successive stages of dissent from accepted premises. See Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: conversion, modernity, and belief* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 44–72.

- 14 Alan Olson, 'Postmodernity and faith', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Vol. 58, no. 1, Spring 1990), p. 44.
- 15 By emancipation, I refer to the series of bills passed in early nineteenth-century England enfranchising Jews, Catholics, Dissenters and other non-Anglican groups and bringing them within the national fold. The price of such emancipation was, as I argue in *Outside the Fold*, op. cit., that religious groups were often asked to forgo the specificity of their religious beliefs in order to become citizens of the state.
- 16 'PM calls for national debate on conversion', *The Hindu* (11 January 1999), p. 1.
- 17 See Antony Copley, *Religions in Conflict: ideology, cultural contact, and conversion in late colonial India* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 18 Richard Fox Young, *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit sources on anti-Christian apologetics in early nineteenth-century India* (Vienna, Roberto Nobili Institute, 1981).
- 19 Copley, *Religions in Conflict*, op. cit. See also my *Outside the Fold*, op. cit., particularly chapter 3, 'Rights of passage', for a discussion of the antagonism felt by Hindu parents towards Christian missionaries, whom they blamed for the Christian conversions of their young children. Deprived of their rights to inheritance on conversion, converts were often assisted by missionaries to bring their cases to court so that their rights would be restored.
- 20 'Singhal statement on Amartya Sen misquoted', op. cit., p. 7.
- 21 Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: subaltern religion and liberation theology in India* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998).
- 22 Great Britain, *Parliamentary Papers, 1852-53*, evidence of J. C. Marshman (Vol. 32), p. 119.
- 23 See Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: literary study and British Rule in India* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 151-2.
- 24 Great Britain, *Parliamentary Papers 1831-32*, Minute by M. Elphinstone, 13 December 1823, (Vol. 9), p. 519.
- 25 'Poverty hindering spread of literacy: PM', *The Hindu* (4 January 1999), p. 10.
- 26 The Probe Team, *Public Report on Basic Education in India* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 14-17. On child labour, the report is not entirely convincing, as it tries to distinguish between family and hired labour and in so doing vacillates between empathy for family needs and condemnation of capitalist exploitation.
- 27 Amartya Sen, 'Basic education as a political issue', in *The Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze Omnibus* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 120.
- 28 'Sen to set up charity with prize money', *The Hindu* (28 December 1998), p. 14.
- 29 Sen's research in Indian villages consistently pointed to the special value of basic education as a tool of social affirmation. As the Probe report (op. cit.) later confirmed, even among the most socially and economically disadvantaged groups, education was strongly valued for enabling upward mobility. Sen punctures the myth propagated by upper castes that the lower castes do not place much importance on literacy because they view education as an instrument of upper-caste domination. On the contrary, as the Probe report also affirms, education remains highly desirable to low-caste groups.
- 30 'Poverty hindering spread of literacy: PM', op. cit., p. 6.
- 31 Sen, 'Basic education as a political issue', op. cit., p. 117.
- 32 See Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1992), in which Sen trenchantly shifts the question economists typically ask ('should there be equality?') to the more important one: 'equality of what?' Sen forces the discussion to concentrate on the diversity of human populations, which inevitably involves different standards of equality; in other words, what is equal to one group of people might be deemed inequality to another. The heterogeneity of social groups requires one constantly to rethink how a range of human capabilities might be harnessed to achieve specific goals, from which standpoint questions of rights and equality can be raised more profitably.

- 33 See Amartya Sen, 'Well beyond liberalization', in *The Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze Omnibus* (op. cit.) for an exploration of these themes, as well as an assessment of India's recent economic reforms. His conclusion that the 'uncaging of the tiger' has not – at least not yet – led to any dynamic animal 'springing out and sprinting ahead' (p. 180) draws attention to the still unfulfilled promises of participatory growth evident in the alarming illiteracy rates and social deprivations.
- 34 See particularly Sen's essay, 'Freedom, agency and well-being', in *Inequality Reexamined*, op. cit., which describes freedom as our right to set goals for ourselves and our ability to get what we value and want; in short, to lead a life we would *choose* to live.