

Book Review

Community and Nation

KL Tuteja, *Religion, Community and Nation: Hindu Consciousness and Nationalism in Colonial Punjab*, Primus Books, New Delhi, 2021, pp: 1-367

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Abstract

KL Tuteja's book Religion, Community and Nation: Hindu Consciousness and Nationalism in Colonial Punjab (2021), published by Primus Books, is a valuable addition to historiography on Punjab in particular and Indian nationalism in general in as much as it offers a most insightful account of the politics of Lajpat Rai and does justice to his contribution, thus nuancing 'secularist' historiography on Indian nationalism.

Writings on Indian nationalism have begun to acquire a new complexity in recent decades. A significant contribution to historiography on Indian nationalism is KL Tuteja's book *Religion, Community and Nation: Hindu Consciousness and Nationalism in Colonial Punjab* published by Primus Books.

In many ways, the region rather than the national space provides a tighter context for understanding the histories of ideas and movements. Punjab, the region that Tuteja has chosen as the spatial context of his study, is historically crucial, as Hindu consciousness here grew in acute awareness of a Muslim majority. Punjab had more than 50-percent Muslims, and Hindus numbered between 40-percent and 36-percent in the first five colonial censuses, with the Sikhs making up between 8-percent and 12-percent of the population.

The Hindu minority in Punjab was, however, the leader in terms of education and industry – particularly when we consider the commercial castes of Khatri, Aroras and Suds. Muslims, and to a lesser extent Sikhs, dominated the agrarian world. Being educated but not being in a position of high social influence despite dominating the jobs that colonialism had introduced often made Punjabi Hindus wary of Islam. They were also gripped by a deep census mentality because Hindu numbers were going down in each colonial census. At the same time, Muslims were uneasy with Hindu

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dominance in colonial jobs and sought greater representation. This unique context made Punjab one of the early crucibles of an organized Hindu consciousness that was at times deeply wary of Islam. The acceptance of the Arya Samaj – which called the Vedas the supreme knowledge – was in part an answer to the Punjabi Hindu’s alienation vis-à-vis the white man and the Muslim majority. In turn, exposure to the Arya Samaj deepened the fault lines in Punjab.

Tuteja’s book traces this Hindu consciousness -- which emerged as a concrete entity in a state where religious identities had historically been fuzzy and fluid -- and seeks to explore its negotiations with an emerging Indian nationalism. In doing so, the author’s deft and authoritative handling of the subject has offered an insightful and scholarly work to those interested in the history of modern Punjab as also the history of Indian nationalism.

The most powerful strand of historiography in India, a strand that remained the hegemonic one at least till the late 1990s, saw Indian nationalism as secular and anti-imperialist. It saw ‘communalism’, or a politics that was centered on the religious community, as the other of Indian nationalism. The most powerful voices of this framework to understand Indian nationalism were Bipan Chandra, Beni Prasad and Tara Chand. Writings of the likes of Christophe Jaffrelot, John Zavos, Peter Van der Veer, Thomas Blom Hansen and BD Graham sought to explore Hindu nationalism as a kind of nationalism rather than as communalism, though sometimes in critical ways.

However, one strand remained largely neglected. This was the question of how to make sense of people who straddled the Indian National Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha, the former being seen as a largely secular organization and the latter being seen as a ‘communal’ organization. The two most important figures who represented this overlap were Madan Mohan Malaviya and Lajpat Rai. This grey area was never fully accounted for by the likes of Bipan Chandra, except for labeling it liberal communalism or semi-communalism, something that sat uneasily with the secular-communal dichotomy. Tuteja’s book fills this gap by providing these leaders their place under the sun as bonafide nationalists.

Tuteja’s book deals at length with Lajpat Rai and nuances the secular-communal dichotomy that the likes of Bipan Chandra constructed by introducing the category of ‘nationalist communitarians’. Tuteja argues that this group of nationalists (and he refers specifically to Lajpat Rai here), were people who believed that serving the religious community and the nation was simultaneously possible. They did not intend to construct a Hindu Rashtra but did feel strongly that the Hindu community needed a voice of its own when it came to settling disputes with other communities within the Indian nation.

Tuteja’s contribution lies in reviving interest in Lajpat Rai as a ‘nationalist communitarian’ rather than a ‘communalist’ and in nuancing the secular-communal binary to accommodate people who believed in representing their community as well

as forging a cross-community, inclusive, Indian nation. However, one shortcoming of Tuteja's work is that despite nuancing the secular-communal dichotomy, he chooses not to break away with it conceptually decades after many works have accorded Hindu and Muslim versions of nationalism in the subcontinent a legitimacy of their own even if they disagreed with them.

Tuteja makes interesting observations regarding the fuzziness of community identity in Punjab in the 19th century, something that reminds one of Harjot Oberoi's works on the construction of religious boundaries in the province. As religious boundaries became sharper in the 20th century, Tuteja shows his willingness to accommodate the likes of those whose thoughts centered round 'Hindus' but believed in a united Indian nation as nationalists of a communitarian kind. Tuteja at the same time dismisses those who sought to construct a nation based on religion as communalists rather than nationalists.

In this sense, Tuteja's work marks a partial movement of conventional secularist scholarship towards accepting the moderate Hindu leadership that straddled the Congress and Hindu Mahasabha as nationalist. However, he does not regard the Hindu Mahasabha-centric politics that is antagonistic to the Congress – meaning the likes of Bhai Parmanand and Savarkar – as nationalists despite the fact that they considered themselves so. In reality, the binary was perhaps not what it was made out to be. Even a fiercely secular nationalist like Bhagat Singh had been a student of Bhai Parmanand, a Hindu nationalist, at Lahore National College, where Parmanand taught the history of European revolutionary movements without getting any remuneration and inspired students to become revolutionaries, as the memoirs of Bhagat Singh's comrade Ram Chandra note. Thus, while there were ideological disagreements, the nationalist-communalist binary is largely an over-reading, as reality --as shown above -- was far more complex.

Tuteja's efforts to trace out the rise of Hindu consciousness in Punjab is commendable. If the work of Kenneth Jones was a classic when it came to tracing the emergence of Arya and Hindu consciousness at the social level in Punjab, Tuteja adds voluminous detail to the political side of the development of this consciousness. For this reason alone, the book is a very useful addition to Punjab studies and a must-read for scholars of modern Punjab.

The book may not be a biography, but in effect doubles up as one. Although there are a few biographies on Lala Lajpat Rai, yet none of these sketch out the politics of the Punjab stalwart in as nuanced a manner as Tuteja does, compellingly demolishing the charge that Lajpat Rai was a 'communalist', notwithstanding his association with the Hindu Mahasabha. In doing so, he adds a layer of nuance to the Mahasabha.

Overall, the book presents an interesting and detailed take on the subject of enquiry and is a valuable addition to works on the history of Punjab in particular and Indian nationalism in general.