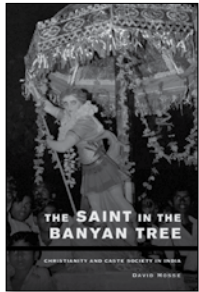


Book Reviews

The Saint in the Banyan Tree: Christianity and Caste Society in India, by David Mosse (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, pp. 385)

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard



This study of caste and Tamil Nadu Roman Catholicism over the past 400 years bristles with insights and often challenges received wisdom about Christianity in India. Mosse focuses on the pseudonymous village of Alapuram, located in Tamil Nadu's Ramnad District near the eastern coast across from Sri Lanka. I will

introduce the main argument of the book and highlight particular concepts that might call into question generally accepted paradigms of caste.

In his preface, David Mosse sets forth his project:

The Saint in the Banyan Tree is concerned with the relationship between the Christian religion and Tamil culture, but its more fundamental objective is to show how and with what consequences the very categories of "religion" and "culture" are produced in historically and locally specific ways. (xi)

I will return to this statement and its implications for "global Christianity" at the end of this review.

The roots of Catholicism in Ramnad District lie in the pioneering missiological approach of seventeenth century Italian Jesuit missionary Robert de Nobili. As Mosse explains,

Catholicism spread in Tamil south India through its flexible capacity simultaneously to "Brahmanize," to popularize in cultic form, to attract royal patronage, and to enact systems of caste ranking. Rather than disrupting existing authority and social investments, Christianity provided another means for their reproduction. (16)

Mosse does an admirable job of documenting and demonstrating the outworking of de Nobili's approach. In the end, the picture that emerges amounts to a rather radical reinterpretation of the de Nobili project. Mosse turns the emphasis from Christianity as an understood entity and how it engages a new and definable context (namely rural Tamil Nadu) to the dynamism of that context and how it absorbed Christianity into its own unique framework.

Christianity on the Tamil plains was not faith "assimilating" to some stable Brahmanic social order. Christian affiliation had

become *part of* a set of political-religious relations and was being drawn into a globalizing economic system in the late precolonial context of instability, warfare, and large-scale internal displacements. (38, italics original)

In other words, local Tamil culture absorbed Roman Catholic Christianity (Protestantism and Pentecostalism appear later in the book) and made it part of itself, transforming it into something quite different than it had been or would be in other cultural contexts. This is not what de Nobili had in mind. Indeed, one of the lessons of this study is that what actually happens in the mission encounter is often well beyond what anyone expects.

The Saint in the Banyan Tree is a book about caste, so Mosse wrestles with this complex construct, which continues to defy definition. Mosse shows that "a century or more" of study has "not produced any widely accepted theory" (96). His introductory discussion includes the framework developed during the years of research behind this book.

What is taken as caste or *jāti* (Tamil *cāti*) defies both structural definition as "caste system" and revisionist characterization as "colonial invention." It is regionally variable and has been profoundly shaped by ideological currents and social-political (and religious) movements. Caste reappears in modern institutions (such as the Catholic priesthood) in the absence of any of its putative ideological underpinnings, and is subject to endless creative elaborations, manipulations, and reassociations. Indeed, caste is often best understood as attachment, performance, or "composition" rather than as a *sui generis* entity, the caste names that recur in this book as networks of attachments bringing about action—"actor networks"—rather than essential or substantial identities. (96, referencing Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, 2005, p. 217)

Mosse's carefully documented study is clear: caste—despite its shifting contours—is a far more basic identity marker in Tamil society than religion. When push comes to shove, rural Tamilians will often break religious ranks and align with fellow caste members who profess a different faith. While this will come as no shock to those familiar with the casteism of Tamil Christianity, seeing caste in this way needs to cause a broader reappraisal of the assumption that "religious" identity is most fundamental to all peoples in all places. As a result of his engagement with Tamil society and its realities, Mosse developed a different angle on caste and Christianity.

Instead of viewing caste as a cultural residuum undissolved by Christian conversion, I ask how Christian ritual contexts have become part of the way in which an indigenous social order is produced and changed. (98)

Alapuram was far on the periphery of Brahmanic influence, so it was royal power that dominated in questions of caste hierarchy. A remarkable shift occurred from traditional practice as Roman Catholicism became established.

While Protestants saw caste as spiritual slavery, Catholics dichotomized society with the Christian message as spiritual and caste as cultural.

The concluding night of a Temple festival is commonly sponsored by political leaders, who act as temple trustees and receive the first honors. As chief donors they represent the *yajamana* (Sanskrit) or “sacrificiant,” paradigmatically the king. The old Jesuit mission encouraged rajas and chiefs into this role at their centers, where, as principle donors and holders of the final *mantakappati* [honorary payment for the ritual procession], they received first honors. The new Madurai mission Jesuit fathers who settled in the Tamil countryside [after the 1814 restitution of the Jesuit order and the 1836 return of this mission field to Jesuit control], however, construed *themselves* as rulers (rather than renouncer teachers [that is, typical holy men in the old Madurai mission rooted in *de Nobili*]). They took over this patron role and its first respects in what became referred to as the *cāmiyār* (priest’s) *mantakappati*. (142, italics original)

This was far from the last or even the most significant transformation to be introduced to this part of Tamil rural society. By the time the new Madurai missionaries reentered Tamil society and redefined their role and standing they were also faced with

their opposite in the highly visible Protestant missions, whose approach to Indian religion and society could not have been more different than their own. Evangelical Protestants generally regarded Brahmanic Hinduism and its spawn, the caste system, as the principal obstacle rather than the means to Christian conversion. To create a space for Tamil Christianity they set out not to emulate but to break the hold they imagined the Brahman priesthood had on Indian society. (51)

Interestingly, both Catholic and Protestant approaches were successful, albeit with two different dalit caste groups, as noted below. Mosse concludes that their approaches were similar in that both spiritualized the socio-economic-political reality of caste problems as spiritual struggles (58). But while Protestants saw caste as spiritual slavery, Catholics dichotomized society with the Christian message as spiritual and caste as cultural (59).

This Catholic attitude toward caste had massive and unforeseen consequences in the long run. In the short term, caste distinctions were rather routinely brought into the institutional church, sometimes the very architecture reflecting the uncleanness of some castes. At festivals and in normal worship services the dalit castes were treated as untouchable and received no honor. Yet Mosse shows that a change had occurred:

Two hundred years of Catholicism had desacralized caste for Christian actors, making it an outer thing, an explicit structure, a public form of knowledge, a display of honor in public rituals that

offered a model of society subject to deliberate contest, something that could be objectified, named, discussed, criticized, or studied. Caste was denaturalized and more about power than person—enacting control, not maintaining moral condition....

Missionaries also relativized and subordinated the codes of caste by introducing alternative ones: Eucharistic unity of the Communion, congregational worship, being addressed by the priest as a Christian collective, caste-free interactions with missionary priests, or in the godparent-child relationship. Participating in the church pointed to a different order within the realm of Catholic religion, which ultimately denied difference and rank and gave no reality to matters of purity and pollution. (272)

While this reality acted as a ferment in minds and hearts and society as a whole, a significant ritual change occurred in 1936. Instead of a missionary priest presiding over the main annual festival, a Tamil forward caste (Vellalar) priest was in charge and decided it was not appropriate to honor Hindu political leaders inside the church. “The village festival had become a Christian festival and Santiyakappar [St. James, or the Saint in the Banyan Tree] a Christian saint rather than the village deity” (155).

This seemingly innocuous transition would have far-reaching ramifications. It brought a previously unknown level of division between Hindus and Christians, and turned caste conflicts from being broadly social matters to matters where internal church relations came into focus.

The most important effect of the disembedding of church from village after 1936 was not, however, to sharpen religious boundaries or to set Christian and Hindu against each other, but rather to create the space within which dalit public protest would develop. (274)

And so Mosse’s study becomes a fascinating outline of the development of dalit activism and dalit theology. First as a protest movement within the Catholic church (which can only be termed highly successful), then as a broader social movement (which also must be considered much more successful than is usually recognized), dalit activism has brought about transformation.

Rather than continue to follow Mosse’s historical trajectory, I will highlight some of the paradoxical developments noted in his impressive presentation and documentation. The Pallar dalit caste is central in all the Roman Catholic dalit developments, but as they gained in social standing they became fiercely oppressive towards other dalit groups. This paved the way for the dalit Paraiyars (whose name led to the English word *pariah*) into Protestantism (178). Ironically, as the hold of caste was weakening in the latter

decades of the twentieth century and barriers between forward castes evaporated, barriers between dalit castes increased significantly (188).

Education was key to dalit uplift. In 1925, the Catholics opened a school in Alapuram village. Access to education expanded horizons and led to improved economic opportunities. Dalit Catholic Pallars emigrated for work in Sri Lanka or Burma, or entered the military or police force, and made enough money to improve their social status in Alapuram. Economic factors fueled transformation and eventually the old social order where ritual services had to be performed by particular caste groups (constantly reestablishing the lowly status of the dalits) was entirely replaced by market-based services for cash payment. Thus, better off dalits no longer performed tasks deemed degrading, and a sense of dignity with a measure of contractual equality emerged even regarding undignified labor. In Mosse's words,

The replacement of a "moral economy" of service with market-based integration, education, independence, and individual free will is a pervasive narrative of social change among those I have known over twenty-five years. (251)

Yet for all this, "caste" (not the old idea, but as "actor networks") has become stronger than ever. "It seems indisputable that the cultural politics of the Church and the state has in recent decades produced a sharpening of religious and caste identities in Tamil Nadu" (231; the strengthening of caste is mainly because "village society is such that any dispute can escalate, and without group support a person is vulnerable" (261)). The opposition to caste, which began in the church as an issue of Christian equality, developed an entirely new basis when it emerged from the church into wider society as a human rights campaign (168, 196, 226, etc.). Then in dalit theology, the entire dalit struggle became redefined as anti-Brahmanism.

Even those whose experience of caste subordination bore little or no relation to priestly models of purity-impurity—those from regions like Ramnad, where royal-feudal models of caste articulated poorly with the Hindu theory of caste or *varnashrama dharma* and whose experience of caste was the political and economical domination of "Backward Caste" Maravars, Kallars, or Utaiyars rather than of Brahmins... were encouraged to articulate dalit dissent as the rejection of Brahmanic Hindu ideology and to reimagine caste as a Hindu religious institution. In short, dalit ideologies began to elaborate the "other" as the Hindu Brahman, and this in turn gave new significance to "dalit Christian" as a countercultural identity. The point is that Christianity was *made* culturally disjunctive through a particular traceable politics of caste; it was not inherently so. (194, italics original)

Mosse has clearly documented the massive shifts in the meaning and practice of caste, particularly how caste as lived in rural Tamil Nadu had little to do with Brahmins or their ideology of ritual purity. And yet dalit theology

managed to sweep away that reality with a new paradigm of caste as an evil, religious, Brahminical structure (even though this would be directly contradicted by a later political agitation, as noted below).

It is not possible to outline in detail all the twists and turns in developments related to caste and Christianity, which Mosse traces right up to the present time. Protestant and Pentecostal interactions with caste realities appear at various points, and it is in this field that two mistakes in Mosse's work should be noted. He misidentifies the dalit Protestant theologian Dyanchand Carr as "Dayananda Carr" (316). More significantly, in his concluding summary he claims that

As missionaries of all denominations well understood, being Christian or threatening conversion offered a means to negotiate or modify but never to substitute for caste belonging. (276)

That may be true of the Roman Catholic missionaries that Mosse had in focus, and perhaps of some traditional Protestants, but it is certainly not true of missionaries of evangelical and Pentecostal persuasion, unless the latter are seen as entirely disingenuous in their private knowledge and public professions.

Mosse introduces the striking phrase "dual discursive competence" to describe dalit interaction in a society in transition. A shift in dalit activism from the church—where it focused on religious equality—to wider society where it spoke of human rights has already been noted. When and where dalits should discuss caste as human rights and when it will be more productive to frame it in religious freedom discourse is an example of dual discursive competence (259). This is central to the lived reality of caste where rights and responsibilities are constantly being negotiated (Mosse destroys the idea that a "caste system" as a static reality in Indian society exists or, indeed, has ever existed). Having identified the practice of dual discursive competence Mosse is able to notice the far-reaching practical utility of this skill, particularly for preventing caste, religious and political disputes from turning violent (although there has been violence, as in 1968; 172f.). Mosse rightly commends the "historically acquired social capacity to retain flexibility and context" that marks the people of India.

Considerable intellectual energy currently goes into trying to explain the causes of ethicized conflict and violence, but perhaps rather less into understanding the normal processes that refuse orientaling alterity, prevent polarization, and inhibit the aggregation and amplification of local conflicts; into examining the historically acquired social capacity to retain flexibility and context... and explaining, against the trend, why India's religious diversity is not always fragile. (264–65)

Indeed, it is rather striking that, with all her astonishing variety and complexity, "India's religious diversity is not always fragile." Rather than studying extremism and

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violence (and seeking to account for them), why not seek to account for stability and peace? In this connection, Mosse attributes the flexibility and social understanding evident in India to her people’s fundamental dual discursive competence, a skill learned over many centuries, not least from the engagement of local peoples with Christianity.

My point is that the dual discursive competencies that now allow engagement with polarizing absolutist communalist, caste, and religious discourses while preserving flexibility and negotiability in social life are embedded in the long history of reconciling Christian universalism and the particularism of caste that this book has traced. (265)

So currently in rural Ramnad in south India there is no longer caste in Christianity (238, 283). Socially, “in the simplest terms there is a paradox: caste inequality among Christians and Hindus is evidently receding as an aspect of village life (less practiced, less spoken), and yet caste is asserted and more visible than ever” (242). Here again, the paradox lies in shifts in the meaning and practice of caste. Caste has moved from being about *hierarchy* to being about *political networks*. Yet Mosse himself warns us against thinking that all of India has experienced the social leveling enjoyed in Alapuram. The developments there, he notes, are “unlike much of rural India, and in striking contrast to some nearby villages” (248). And even in Alapuram, “dalit Christian activists actively perpetuate the mobilizing memory of caste discrimination in Catholic worship” (319) for their own political purposes. Similarly, a complicated piece of local history continues to be paraded for dalit political ends in the commemoration of radical Pallar leader John Pandian who in the 1990s served as “a symbol of caste power, conflict, and violent retaliation—everything, in fact, that no longer characterized *actual* caste relations in the village” (255, italics original). Dalit activism hardly exists in Alapuram at present, the term *dalit* itself “an unfamiliar concept” (322).

What does it mean to be Christian in a world with this particular variety of complexity? Indian Christians are offended by the injustice that denies dalit Christians economic privileges afforded to Hindu and Buddhist dalits, but Mosse identifies the internal contradiction.

The campaign to have Christian dalits included in the list of Scheduled Castes (SC) . . . [and thus] eligible for state benefits and protections alongside Hindu dalits precisely contradicted the conversion discourse of dalit struggle against caste as a *Hindu* institution. (206, italics original)

Christian concerns are no longer central in the struggle for dalit rights, although Christianity is being promoted by

some as necessarily involved in wider dalit rights campaigns (224, 283). At the least, “Christianity today is a vehicle for the internationalization of dalit human rights” (278). But despite being “entirely devoid of evangelistic intention” (again Mosse is not in touch with Evangelical and Pentecostal approaches), dalit activists “have to contend with a persistent Hindu nationalist delegitimation of dalit activism as a Western-inspired antinational vehicle for Christian proselytism and cultural appropriation” (227).

At the local level,

It is fair to say that while Christianity is “dalitized” in the seminary, it appears “globalized” in the village. Christian practice is disembedded from structures of caste or separated (like the newly glass-encased statues) from the grime of cultic worship, and diversified into religious styles reflecting various streams of global Christianity, whether Catholic or Pentecostal. . . . The environment of Hindu nationalism or Christian fundamentalism has not fostered Christian political identification, not least because caste identity remains the structural basis of religious coexistence. (279; nowadays the global Pentecostal style of worship is also *within* the Catholic church, 94)

Regrettably, I conclude my long review without reference to Mosse’s insights on spirit possession and sin confession as similar activities; or form and meaning in Christian adaptation to Hindu forms and Hindu adaptation to Christian; or further development of insights related to Protestantism and Pentecostalism and Hindutva; or many other insightful comments related to caste-ism and dalitism.

In the end, as Mosse himself points out, his study demonstrates that

Catholic religion is not a transhistorical global phenomenon introduced into “local cultures” by missionary agents, but a contingent and at times unstable category of thought and action—wrought in ways that need to be discovered—that does not, however, fail to point beyond itself to transcendent truth. (269)

Such is global “Christianity”—so many, so very different entities that to even attempt to reify what is “essential” does violence against diverse local realities. Mosse’s historical and sociological analysis of Tamil Catholicism is enlightening, humbling, inspiring, and intimidating. May it find a wide readership and produce paradigm shifts in the understanding of south Indian Roman Catholicism, as well as stimulate fresh perspectives on the Protestant and Pentecostal worlds that are far from Mosse’s central focus. **IJFM**