

Millennium - Journal of International Studies

<http://mil.sagepub.com>

Book Review: Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, 403 pp., \$29.95 hbk.)

Rahul Rao

Millennium - Journal of International Studies 2008; 37; 245

DOI: 10.1177/03058298080370011120

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://mil.sagepub.com>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[Millennium Publishing House, LSE](#)

Additional services and information for *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* can be found at:

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

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

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

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

from a longer section on the background of the 20th century and a more detailed conclusion chapter revisiting the interesting theoretical debates in the initial pages. However, these are minor points that do not compromise the success of the book in delivering what it promised in an excellent manner. *The Islamic Republic and the World* is of great relevance to anyone who is interested in Iran and the Middle East, in revolutions as well as in a different understanding of international relations.

DERYA GOCER

Derya Gocer is a PhD candidate of the Department of International Relations, London School of Economics, London, UK

Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, 403 pp., \$29.95 hbk.).

Although India has been a leitmotif in Martha Nussbaum's work, functioning as the primary non-western arena in which she attempts to demonstrate the relevance of her universalist convictions, this is her first book exclusively about the country. Aimed primarily at audiences weaned on a Huntingtonian diet of clashing civilizations, the book's investigation of the political and psychological roots of Hindu extremism performs the valuable service of reminding readers (western and Indian alike) that fundamentalism is not the monopoly of political Islam. The world *is* witnessing a clash, Nussbaum argues, but far from being inter-civilizational, it is one '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' (p. ix).

The Clash Within opens chillingly with an account of the violence that engulfed the state of Gujarat in 2002 in retaliation for the burning of a train carrying Hindu pilgrims at Godhra. Facilitated by the rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government of Narendra Modi, the violence unleashed against Muslims in Gujarat was unprecedented for its systematic and sexualized nature, even in a country with a history of communal pogroms. Treating Gujarat as an invitation to investigate the sources of such savagery, Nussbaum turns to the writings of Hedgewar, Golwalkar and Savarkar – late 19th and early 20th century Indian admirers of European fascist ideologies, who believed that the overthrow of British imperialism demanded a militaristic romantic nationalism that defined belonging in terms of blood, culture and religion. She juxtaposes these figures against the more pluralistic visions of Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru, which were institutionalized with some

success in the Indian constitution. Much of the book is an account of the clash between these rival conceptions of nationhood in a number of different arenas. Nussbaum is at her best in the chapters discussing conflicts over the writing of history and social science textbooks (Chs 7, 8), not least because these issues resonate with themes on which she has written eloquently in the past – the defence of a liberal arts education, the role of emotions and the imagination in building a public culture of political decency (*Cultivating Humanity*, Harvard University Press, 1997). Her engagement with the propaganda of the Hindu right is patient, rigorous and merciless.

If such propaganda readily disintegrates under scrutiny, why does it exercise such a powerful grip on the public imagination? Here, Nussbaum offers a psychoanalytical account: the shame and anxiety engendered by centuries of contact with orientaling colonizers who cast natives as degenerate and effeminate, ultimately finds expression in a hyper-masculine nationalism that seeks domination over its women and violation of other (here, Muslim) women (Ch. 6). While this goes some way towards explaining the deep psychological structures of anti-Muslim prejudice in India, it cannot account for the timing of its expression at particular historical junctures. Specifically, it fails to explain the meteoric electoral rise of the BJP from one of the smallest parties in the Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament) in 1984, to the single largest party in 1996. Understanding this requires paying a great deal more attention than Nussbaum devotes (pp. 174–5, 181) to the political and economic shifts of the time. Readers seeking explanations for the emergence of the BJP as the strongest pole in a triangular contest with a declining Congress and a succession of unstable 'Third Front' governments are likely to be disappointed.

More troublingly, Nussbaum overlooks key sources of resilience of the secular Indian state. She bemoans the lack of flourishing national parties and criticizes the proliferation of regional and caste-based parties as having entrenched divisions in the polity (pp. 117, 139). This overlooks the possibility that the institutionalization of particularistic identities might have had the opposite effect. Ramachandra Guha (*India After Gandhi*, Macmillan, 2007) has shown that the creation of linguistic federal units, far from balkanizing the country, weakened separatist tendencies by accommodating some of the claims of linguistic nationalists. In the sphere of religious affairs, *pace* Nussbaum (p. 147), the Constituent Assembly was probably correct not to interfere in the personal laws of religious minorities given their extreme insecurity in the wake of Partition. Indeed affirmative action, while certainly entrenching caste identities, has promoted a new confidence among dalits ('untouchables') and 'other backward castes' (OBCs). Indeed Nussbaum's criticism of regional and caste parties is ironic in a book about secularism in India. With the exception of the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, the BJP's regional allies exercised a largely moderating influence on the party while it headed a national coalition government (1998–2004). And with the exception of the Bahujan Samaj Party, the anti-Brahminism of 'lower-caste' parties has tended to make them vociferous opponents of the BJP; OBC leaders such as Laloo Prasad Yadav (who receives a dismissive two-page mention, pp. 138–9)

and Mulayam Singh Yadav (unmentioned) have – for all their corruption and venality – become some of the more unlikely custodians of Nehruvian secularism in India today. Similarly unacknowledged are the Communist parties.

Nussbaum's antipathy towards the institutionalization of particularistic identities may reflect a liberal cosmopolitan distaste for identity politics. But this overlooks the need for long-subjugated identities to find spaces within which to construct alternative subjectivities. The proliferation of such spaces in the form of identity-based parties has certainly made governance more challenging. But it is also, perhaps, India's best insurance against the hegemonic assertion of identity.

RAHUL RAO

Rahul Rao is a term fellow in Politics at University College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
