
In her preface to *The Clash Within*, Martha Nussbaum writes: ‘This is a book about India for an American and European audience’. Its main purpose is to tell its audience about religious violence in India and to explain that the real ‘clash within’ is not between Hindus and Muslims or Hinduism and Islam, but—as in other 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).

After an introduction, chapter 1 discusses the appalling anti-Muslim communal violence in Gujarat in 2002, in which the state government and its chief minister Narendra Modi were deeply implicated. Chapter 2, on the ‘human face of the Hindu right’, includes interviews with a Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader, a Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) intellectual, and a leading politician in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The next chapter explores the thought and vision of three great founders of modern India—Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru—who stood for everything that the Hindu right would like to destroy; for Nussbaum, their ideas should still be at the heart of Indian pluralistic democracy. Chapter 4 outlines the history of independent India as a constitutional democracy and the next one discusses the rise of the Hindu right (or ‘Hindu nationalism’, as many other writers label it) since the early twentieth century.

Chapter 6 on ‘fantasies of purity and domination’ explores emotions and desires, particularly the role of shame and male sexual anxiety in Hindu violence against Muslims in Gujarat. The discussion, partly inspired by psychoanalytic approaches, is (as she notes) very different from the political analysis of the rest of the book. Chapter 7 explores Hindu nationalist attempts to rewrite Indian history as a perennial Hindu-Muslim struggle, and the often vicious attacks on Indian and American scholars whose work offends the ideologues. Chapter 8 discusses education in India, including the controversy over school textbooks and the ‘saffronisation’ policy of the BJP government in 2000-4. Chapter 9 is about the Hindu diaspora, its connection with Hindu nationalism in India and its future in the United States. A short concluding chapter restates the main themes.

*The Clash Within* is well-written, contains no obscure jargon and assumes no specialist Indianist knowledge. Nussbaum has been active in research
and legal and human rights work in India over many years, and she has been there ‘so many times that it now feels like my second home’ (p. xii). She is a friend of and intellectual collaborator with Amartya Sen, and stresses her empathy with the culture of Tagore’s school at Santiniketan. She is, of course, also an eminent political philosopher noted for the breadth of her learning and expertise. Unfortunately, however, Nussbaum does not know enough about Hindu nationalism and its social, religious and political contexts; the endnotes mention only a fraction of the relevant modern scholarship and her text contains too many factual errors and unsubstantiated claims.

Space prevents a detailed list of these, but a few representative examples may be mentioned. On the basis of her interviews with the two men from the VHP and RSS, Nussbaum inerts that the VHP more openly asserts the acceptability of violence than the RSS (p. 57), an odd generalisation unsupported by the evidence as a whole. We are told that the need for ‘affirmative action to aid the lower castes and women has led to a balkanization of politics, which the BJP exploits to its advantage, and to the entrenchment of caste as a social issue rather than to its disappearance’ (p. 123). ‘Balkanization’, which presumably refers too to the rise of caste-or community-based parties, hinders the BJP as much as it helps it, and if the generalisation about caste is not exactly wrong, it still misleads by suggesting that the caste system would have vanished without the reservations policy. And no scholar of caste and politics would agree that: ‘By now it is clear that the role of caste in political life has destabilized politics’ (p. 141). How is it clear and when was politics casteless and stable? More generally, Nussbaum’s argument ignores the debate about the ‘democratisation of democracy’ that is now central to analysis of politics of all stripes in contemporary India. Nussbaum quotes Rudolph’s conventional conclusion in 1992 that the televised Ramayana serial played ‘a leading role in creating a national Hindu identity’ (p. 173), but although she mentions Rajagopal’s book (p. 172), she ignores his subtle argument that: ‘If the [serial] reinforced anything, it was not national identity so much as an immense national dis-identification, the sense of confirming what the nation was not’, and that this nullity is what the Hindu nationalists exploited.1 There are also some careless distortions of other authors’