
Robert Frykenberg was born in India and grew up in Telugu-speaking mission circles. His adult life has been devoted to India studies, and his first major publication dates back to 1965: *Guntur District 1788-1848. A History of Local Influence and Central Authority in South India*. This sober title conceals work which is regarded by discerning Indian historians as a pioneer study shifting the focus in historical research away from the national level natural in the years after independence to in-depth regional studies based on rich regional archives. It would also have been a classic on the Victorian struggle against corruption in politics and administration had it not been, from a British point of view, about an obscure place and partly about exotic actors. Other titles indicate how broad and basic Frykenberg’s focus as historian and political scientist has been – for example, the volume he edited in 1969 on *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*. He is a historian’s historian, a gifted generalist whose range of interests includes the history of churches and Christianity. One might argue, indeed, that his roots in general history, the creativeness with which he applies this background to the history of churches, and his passionate concern about the plight of the traditional victims of discrimination in India make this publication a counterpart to the work by Terence Ranger on churches in Africa.

With Frykenberg’s broad interests it is not surprising that perhaps a quarter of this book is devoted to “Contextualising [the] Complexity” of the history of Christianity in India. A crucial chapter, “India’s Raj and Political Logic”, comprises a dense analysis of the structures of the establishment of what may have been, at one level, British rule, but at another level could well be termed, as Frykenberg does, the “Hindu Raj”. The broad British commitment to religious neutrality in India was a survival strategy because their own numbers were so small and because people in India clung to their own religious and social identities so passionately. Furthermore, in many ways executive regional power was held by Hindu elite groups whose procedures and personnel the Raj had taken over from political units the British had replaced. And this leads the author to an important view of Indian politics at the grass-roots level. “Larger political entities….could come and go [in Indian history], but ‘little domains’ [‘small hard pieces’, as he calls them in another place] and their rulers survived”, i.e. the Raj in itself did not challenge stable and resourceful local hierarchies controlled by the “twice-born”. These are vital considerations if one wishes to understand the widespread nineteenth century missionary concentration on conversion at an elite level and its skewed impact, actually strengthening the practice of existing pieties and the institutional strength of what was coming to be called “Hinduism”.

Frykenberg himself writes that compressing an indocentric history of Christianity into a structured argument of only 450 pages involves carefully honed skills of exclusion. Indeed, in his
final chapter, he lists key organisations and people which do not appear in his text, including Mother Theresa, the YMCA and the Basel Mission. But his range of reference is, nevertheless, highly impressive. Substantial attention is given to the complex history of the Thomas Christians and their “canonical” assertion of the presence of the Apostle in India (there is, they say, as much or as little evidence for this as for the assertion that St. Peter reached Rome…). There is also a basic chapter on the reconstitution of the Catholic Church in nineteenth century India, when the resurgent Vatican set out afresh to expunge the Portuguese privileges in Catholic administration going back to the Treaty of Tordesillas and when the Jesuits – whom Frykenberg regards as a major force in the subcontinent – returned. The author is also prepared to play to his own strengths, which lie in first-hand knowledge in depth of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. For instance, instead of expounding in detail the importance for the history of Christianity of the Indian Mutiny of 1857 – an event which took place primarily in the North – he pays useful and intensive attention to early and mid nineteenth century developments in the Madras Presidency. He discusses the place of Christians as literary figures in the history of eighteenth and nineteenth century Tamil. He describes the rage, shared not only by Hindus and Muslims but also by many Europeans when, in the 1840s, Governor Tweeddale in Madras began to refer to non-Christians as “Heathens”. And he offers extensive references to the history of Christians in Tirunelveli, the first district to see mass conversion movements in India, and the locus of the “Tinnevelly Riots” of 1858.

Two aspects of Frykenberg’s exposition of Christianity in India strike me as especially important for someone like this reviewer who is still a novice in work on Indian history. Firstly, he really does pursue his theme, as his title promises, right up to the present day, in which out of the passionate nineteenth century Hindu resistance to mission the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its extremist backers have developed as a major force and serious assaults on churches or Christians have become something of a weekly occurrence. He goes on to offer key points of orientation which help to explain where two millennia of Christian existence in India are now leading. He makes it clear that statistics for Christian adherence are, from various points of view, highly sensitive politically in India. The Census of India offers figures which could be reflective of as little as a third of the true number of those making a serious Christian confession. If this is correct, India would be the seventh Christian nation of the world by absolute numbers, with as many Christians as Germany has people. These numbers make striking sense when one accepts that there are more active missionaries in India now than ever before – Frykenberg cites an estimate of at least 40,000 active missionaries as of the early twenty-first century. These missionaries are, of course, almost all Indian. On the Catholic side it would be possible to create an organigram showing their relations to the Bishop’s Conference, and thus obtain a reliable overview of the whole. But among Protestants this would be far less easy. The Indian Missionary Association, founded in 1977 and uniting over 200 Protestant and Pentecostalist agencies pursuing mission (including Baptists from the largely Christian populations of the North-East), is almost certainly not predominantly an agency linked to the Protestant ecumenical union churches most visible in the West – the Church of South India and Church of North India.

As Frykenberg depicts the situation in India today, conversion movements are taking place primarily among Dalits and tribal peoples. He cites here as an example conversions among the Bhangi sweeper class in the “cow-belt” state of Uttar Pradesh. This is an astonishing story of adroit persistence over the generations among village Banghis in the face of serious persecution,