Laura Dudley Jenkins, *Religious Freedom and Mass Conversion in India*

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. 312 pages. Cloth, $89.85. ISBN 9780812250923.

Freedom of religion is one of the most controversial issues in India today. Several international bodies and human rights organizations have reported on the declining level of religious freedom in India over the last few years. Considering this, in 2015, during his visit to India, former US President Barack Obama pointed out the strife

between Hindus and minorities and urged India to uphold its constitutional commitment to freedom of religion. Most reports have shown that religious freedom in India has declined significantly under the current BJP-led regime, which follows a Hindu majoritarian ideology. It is in this context Laura Jenkins's *Religious Freedom and Mass Conversion in India* becomes significant. Drawing on historical and contemporary narratives and case studies of mass conversion movements to Christianity, Buddhism, and Judaism in India during the 1930s, the 1950s, and the present, Jenkins argues that "challenges to converts' religious freedom are not a recent, BJP invention; rather, they are rooted in these earlier eras, leading to some surprising narrative consistencies across time and religious communities" (23–24). This, however, does not lessen the involvement of Hindu nationalists in flouting India's religious freedom. In fact, Jenkins specifically notes that "the steady growth of Hindu nationalism means that long-standing narratives about converts have been put into practice through new legislation, litigation, and campaign, menacing religious minorities to an unprecedented degree" (24).

While Hindu nationalists have argued that aggressive religious conversion by minorities undermines the constitutional principle of religious freedom, the minorities have argued that the Hindu nationalists' use of violence to threaten and not allow minorities to convert / propagate their religion is a violation of the fundamental right to religious freedom. Given that a large percentage of the converts to minority religions in India are from the poor and marginalized Dalits and Adivasi communities, a major contention has been the question of their agency and sincerity—whether they convert out of "genuine" spiritual transformations or were motivated by material benefits. In this book, Jenkins takes up these two issues—agency and sincerity of the converts—and provides a detailed analysis of the relationship between minorities, majorities, and the state on the one hand and the politics of conversion and religious freedom on the other.

The book is divided into two parts, each having three chapters, and an introduction and conclusion. In the introduction, Jenkins sets the tone for the book by engaging with other scholarship and posing vital questions on agency and sincerity in various conversion movements in late-colonial and contemporary India. In the three chapters in part 1, the book shows how conversion to Christianity (in the 1930s), Buddhism (in the 1950s), and Judaism (in the present) has resulted in socio-economic and political mobility among the converts. Specifically, chapter 1 discusses how Christian missionaries were accused of / criticized for (even by Gandhi) using enticements to convert impoverished communities and how such converts were motivated not by genuine spiritual motives but by material incentives. In this context, American Methodist missionary J. W. Pickett conducted a large-scale survey to understand the motives of conversion. The survey "evidence" clearly established the importance of individual agency and spiritual sincerity in mass conversions. Chapter 2 discusses how mass conversion of B. R. Ambedkar and Dalits to Buddhism in the 1950s provided not just an opportunity to assert their agency against the humiliating caste structure but to establish religious freedom and religious equality. Specifically, conversion to Buddhism made untouchables feel "the equal of every other human being" (71). Jenkins cites Ambedkar's writings to argue that "the idea of sincerity as 'pure' spirituality" (69) is impossible and thus the Ambedkarite Buddhist conversion is an attempt of spiritual and political mobility. In chapter 3, Jenkins discusses the case of the Bnei Menashe community of

Mizoram and their conversion to Judaism. While critics have questioned the sincerity of Mizo Jewish conversion, which they believe is being motivated by gaining Israeli citizenship through transnational migration, Jenkins shows how "this spatial mobility actually reinforces rather than undermines the sincerity of the conversion" (99), as the (spatial) migration (*aliyah*) is itself a religious act.

While in part 1 Jenkins discusses how converts used their agency during conversion and how conversion helped them achieve *mobility* (social, political, spatial, and spiritual), in part 2 she discusses the structures of *immobility* (strategies that prevent conversion, such as prosecution, prevention, and persecution). In chapter 4, Jenkins examines the anti-conversion laws, ironically known as the Freedom of Religions Act, which *prosecute* Christians and Muslims for forcible and induced conversions. The problem is that very often officials ignore the testimony of the converts and question their intention of conversion. In particular, these laws exhibit paternalistic tendencies as they assume that low-caste, tribal, and female populations are easily susceptible to forced conversion. Assuming that these groups cannot decide for themselves, and questioning their agency and sincerity, the officials often make decisions that restrict conversion in the name of protecting religious freedom. Chapter 5 examines the reservation/quota system in India and shows how it *prevents* Dalits from accessing the quota system if they have converted to Christianity or Islam. Although the reservation system was originally meant for Hindu Dalits, it has subsequently been extended to lower-caste Sikhs and Buddhists, since they are a part of Indic religions; Dalit Muslims and Christians are denied this opportunity because of the fear that it might increase Dalit conversion to these "foreign" religions. As a consequence, Dalit Muslims and Christians cannot exercise both rights together—the right to convert and the right to access; they have to let go of one to exercise the other. In chapter 6, Jenkins discusses love jihad conversion narratives and shows how Muslim men are persecuted for seducing and converting Hindu women to Islam. Specifically, Jenkins argues that these narratives are not only deeply entrenched in but "exacerbate both Islamophobia and sexism and ultimately restricts religious freedom" (182).

Broadly, Jenkins argues that some of these "masterplots" or "predominant narratives" have been responsible for limiting religious freedom in India, and it is therefore vital that we collect "counternarratives" to defy and refute these "masterplots." Thus, in the second part of the book, Jenkins cites various counternarratives that corroborate how converts exercised their agency and acted sincerely during conversion. Furthermore, given that both enthusiasts and critics have used the religious freedom argument to either advance or resist conversion, Jenkins argues that mere religious freedom is not enough to protect the minorities; in fact, as we see in the second part of the book, religious freedom was used by authorities to undermine equality. What is therefore vital is the inclusion of religious equality within the concept of religious freedom. Jenkins thus concludes that "we should replace the selective, majoritarian religious freedom so prevalent in the world today with a more equal freedom" (218).

This book makes several important contributions. First, in contrast to studies that call for strengthening religious freedom laws to protect the rights and interests of religious minorities, this book brilliantly shows how religious freedom laws can be used to undermine religious equality. Second, it exposes the majoritarian and paternalistic tendencies of the Indian state and how it denies minorities their constitutional rights. Finally, it shows the importance of counternarratives in decentering

"masterplots" and bringing about political transformation. The book is analytically insightful and methodologically innovative and provides a vital contribution to understanding the relationship between religion, the state, and citizenship rights in India.

Sarbeswar Sahoo
Indian Institute of Technology Delhi