

Book Review/Analysis

R. F. Young and S. Jebanesan, *The Bible Trembled: The Hindu-Christian Controversies of Nineteenth Century Ceylon*, Sammlung de Nobili, Vienna, 1995.

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The book, taking its title from a Saivite revivalist verse¹, is an excellent book that should be read by all South Asia scholars – anthropologists studying the radical changes that occurred in the nineteenth century in Sri Lankan Tamil society and those historians and politicians seeking to understand "Tamil character" and thence explanations from the past to explain the present. Indeed, the book is so rich in information – information from old missionary correspondence and newspapers that are not easily accessible and is at odds with most Tamils' impressions of themselves as a people and of what really happened in the nineteenth century – that the book is, without exaggeration, *must* reading for scholars as well as ordinary Tamils who wish to know who they are. The second book for 1995 dealing with Sri Lankan (or Ceylonese) Protestant missions of the last century², it shows the increased interest in this important, but long-neglected field of scholarship. Both books, interestingly, show the moulding of a "Protestant Hindu" character, although the book under review does so less explicitly.

The book is a historical description of the Christian-missionary challenge to the Saivite Hinduism it came across in Jaffna and the Saivite response to it, during the nineteenth century. Whichever position one might be sympathetic to, in the intellectually vibrant debate that ensued in the first half of the nineteenth century, what is clear is that the two sides believed very passionately in what they held to be true and were alive to the rational underpinnings of their faith; in contrast to the attitude today of avoiding a position so as to be fashionably "impartial." Or for that matter, in opposition to the intellectually insipid and even void position of saying that all religions are the same, and in so doing, exposing ones ignorance of the conflicting claims of the different religions. As the book shows, the Tamils, Christian and Hindu alike, were well informed of each other's position. Their attention to the details of their faith would put the modern Christian and Hindu to shame. As a simple example, consider the "Catholic" practice of bowing before the altar. Most Christians today would think of it

¹ The verse reads,
The Bible trembled at the fierce battle engaged with
Muttukkumarak Kavirayar [1780-1851];
The Bible fell down and lay unconscious when attacked by Navalar;
and now it lies dead, smitten by Tamotaram Pillai [1832 - 1901].
The three named persons were 19th century revivalist leaders from Jaffna.

² The other book is
Charles R. A. Hoole, *Modern Sannyasins: Protestant Mission Contribution to Ceylon Tamil Culture*, Peter Lang AG, Berne, 1995. For the interaction of Roman Catholicism with Hinduism, see N. Maria Saveri, *A Catholic Hindu Encounter*, Ceylon Printers, Colombo, 1992; and Anton Mathias, *The Catholic Church in Jaffna*, Jaffna, 1992.

as something quaint (even idolatrous) that the Anglicans and Roman Catholics simply do out of tradition, and that the other Protestants do not do. But not so the Tamil of the last century. As the book shows, they, Christians and Hindus, were debating the meaning of the injunction in Psalm 99:5 to "Bow down at his footstool," the Ark, the blessings on those who did (2 Sam. 6:12) and the plague that visited those who did not (1 Sam. 5); as well as the Saivite revivalist Arumuka Navalar's position that the Old-Testamental laws were an affirmation of Saivite practices based on the similarities between Hindu ideas of cleanliness and the injunctions of Leviticus; the "cleansing" properties of the waters off Rameswaram and of the Jordan; the Hindu God Murukan's holy mountain and the Biblical call to "bow down towards his holy mountain (Psalm 99: 9)." Navalar even extended his supposed similarities between the two religions to the New Testament, using Jesus's transfiguration on a "sacred mountain" (2 Pet. 1:18) and pointing out that the good Saivite renounces property and marriage, just as Jesus and Paul asked³.

For the scholar, while the vast archives referred to certainly cannot be expected to be reproduced in the book of about 200 pages (albeit in small font), it is yet most helpful through its extensive footnotes and quotations in pointing out to where one must go for what kind of information. These archives consist of nineteenth century missionary correspondence now stored at the Wesleyan, Anglican and American Missions' head-offices in England, New England and Jaffna College in Sri Lanka, and nineteenth century newspapers from Jaffna stored at Jaffna College and other research centers in Jaffna, and newspapers from Madras. Again for the scholar, the book raises many unanswered question that are pointers to avenues for further enquiry. In an indirect sense, the book is an indictment of the academic climate in Jaffna⁴; for one naturally asks, if all these archives have been in Jaffna for so long, why has it taken so long for them to be examined as thoroughly as by this book?

It is worthwhile giving a few snippets from the book to show how interesting the book is and wide its coverage:

- i) When Robert Carver of the Wesleyan mission initiated a discussion on Hinduism with a Brahmin, the latter refused to tell him anything of Hinduism, saying, "Sir, if a man have a [precious] stone or a treasure, will he not lock it up in a box and not shew everyone?"
- ii) Daniel Poor of the American mission learnt of the mistakes in the Brahmin Vicuvanata's almanac in predicting the eclipse of 20 March 1829 and used his own accurate prediction, at an event in Vattukkotai (Batticotta) with the whole village gathered to watch the skies, to discredit Hinduism. The missionaries thereafter produced their own almanacs, just like the Hindu Pancangam, but

³ As the authors point out, the New Testamental position is spelt out when Jesus is asked whether one should worship God in Jerusalem or Samaria, and he responds: "True worshippers will worship the father in spirit and in truth" (John 4:20-23).

⁴ Given the fact that most work there is in Tamil and therefore not under wider critical peer-review, one has deep concerns on the depth of scholarship there.

with Christian verses⁵. According to the authors, "They [the Tamils] did not yet realize that the science introduced at Batticotta Seminary⁶ was universal, its principles transcending the culture of the West and not as rooted in and affirmative of Christianity as the missionaries had presented it to be. It was the mostly Vellala students and teachers, not the brahmins, who would eventually acculturate modernity with tradition in the 1840s."

- iii) When Batticotta Seminary taught that the earth is round, the Hindus argued back saying that, if so, the oceans would empty into the heavens.
- iv) In the early years, the hooting of an owl would see all students running out of school because of the ill-omen it portended. When a student, Jonathon Magee, keeled over on the fifth day of the waning moon, the *pancami*, all students left and Batticotta Seminary had to close for a while.
- v) The Pandit Chandracekhara bathed after every class on Tamil he gave the missionary, to cleanse himself of pollution.
- vi) It is not an uncommon thing on a missionary's drawing near a school, in the words of a missionary, "to observe the scouts running with all their might to announce that the missionary is coming. And every badge of heathenism is cast aside with all possible celerity, and every boy vociferates his lesson with stentorian accentuation." According to Daniel Poor: "We have long been pained to notice, that when the church members leave the service of the mission, they either at once or gradually leave the church or all regularity of attendance on Christian ordinances, as though they were freed from a yoke of bondage. Many of them openly apostatize from the faith, and others make ingenious apologies for their irregularities."
- vii) Contrary to today's claims for Hindu universality, in the last century, Arumuga Navalar regarded the teaching of Saivism to non-Saivites and "trafficking in holy books" to be "great sins." In his view, discussing religion with others was insulting to Siva unless his supremacy was already acknowledged: "Those who hold anything as equal to or better than the teachings of the Savite Scriptures and their preachers will go to hell," and that "It is the duty of every Saivite to kill those who steal Sivan's property⁷ or revile him. If one is not strong enough to kill the blasphemer, one must hire another to do it. If one has nothing to hire with, one must leave the country where the sinner lives. By remaining in the country one becomes a participator in the sin."

⁵ Most of these are said to be available at Jaffna University.

⁶ The precursor to Jaffna College at Vattukkottai.

⁷ Here property includes followers in the Tamil word rendering the meaning.

- viii) The Nallur and Maviddapuram Temples, especially at festival time, were notorious for robbery and violence including rape, accompanied by opium use in 1860s, as reported in the daily press of the time.

All this, however, is not to say the book is without its flaws, which I categorize into three areas. First, for me, personally, the most disturbing was what I perceived to be an uncharitably hard attitude towards missionary thinking. To the authors, missionary eagerness to engage the Hindu in debate is heaping "discourtesy and insult" on the Hindu. When the missionary Daniel Poor introduced recitations of the Kantapurānam at the Batticotta Seminary – something that one would think was in the normal line of academic enquiry and debate, and especially open of a Christian mission – the authors, addressing the Hindu protest against "the blasphemous recitation of a sacred text in a profane place," accuse poor Mr. Poor of an offence of great evil (I assume the authors used the word "enormity" knowing its meaning and not incorrectly for enormousness⁸). Missionary unbelief in Hinduism is, to the authors, "bias." Henry Hoisington is accused of extreme evangelical zeal in the matter of the age of Indian astronomy, on which the authors seem to be unaware of the dependence of Indian astronomy on the Roman and Greek⁹. Myron Winslow is described as "crudely ignorant" because he melted down an idol presented to him by a new convert. The choice of words in chapter and section titles – such as *Missionary Polemics*, *The Silver Slippers of Missionaryism* – while perhaps intentionally provocative with a view to catching the reader's eye, is nonetheless prejudiced and unfortunate. In arguing that the missionaries lacked understanding, the authors themselves appear not to understand the missionaries, their faith and their commitment and motivation. And indeed, the authors appear to be repeating the over-worn cliché of liberal apologists in claiming to see the hidden meanings as opposed to the obvious meanings that most do. In their words, "Purānic studies are moreover notoriously complex, and meaning in myth is perplexingly multivalent. [Missionaries] preferred the literal narrative meaning as the most evident level at which the texts speak." The word preferred, appears to imply the charge of intentional distortion, not recognizing that most people read meanings at the obvious level.

To give an example, the authors describe the following from the Kantapurānam: Murukan, wedded to Teyvayanai, disguised himself as an elderly ascetic and wooed Valli, a comely hunter's daughter. Resisting his explicitly erotic advances, she fled into the forest, only to find her path blocked by Ganesa, his brother, who had transformed himself into a huge elephant. Trapped at last and helpless, she was abducted and ravished. The authors add, "As was often the case, the meaning of the myth was found [by the missionaries] only at the straightforward narrative level. ... The episode of Murukan and Valli was actually only an allegory about God's persistent quest for union

⁸ p. 63

⁹ To quote H. G. Rawlinson from A.L. Basham(Ed.), *A Cultural History of India*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975: p. 438: "Hindu astronomers freely acknowledge their indebtedness to Alexandria. One of the principal Sanskrit astronomical treatises was the *Romaka Siddhanta*, or Roman Manual. Another, the *Paulisa Siddhanta*, was based on the works of Paul of Alexandria (AD 378) The Sanskrit names for the signs of the Zodiac, and other astronomical terms, are of Greek origin.

with the human soul. Kantapurānam merely affirmed in the language of metaphor that divine love sometimes intrudes itself into this-worldly experience with unexpected and overwhelming force."

In giving this rendering, the authors appear to be ignorant of the natural historical development of Hinduism: Early man, noting the causative relationship between coitus and new life, regards the female genitals as full of energy (*sakti*) and the act of procreation as a mystical process whereby this energy is released for creating new life and taken by the man from the woman. Hence the male and female genitals (*lingam* and *yoni*) are objects of worship in Hinduism and sex (as with Devadasis) becomes a natural part of worship where the intent is to release this *sakti*. Thus in the story of Anasuya, given in the book, when she through sexual abstinence and yogic meditation accumulates extraordinary powers, it is natural to find the three Gods of the Hindu *trimurthy* trying to seduce her – Brahma who asks her to serve food naked, the ithyphallic¹⁰ Siva fondling his genitals, and the lecherous Visnu in other ways. She thereupon chants a *mantra* and transforms them into helpless babes, thus demonstrating the powers accumulated through sexual abstinence. Such behaviour by the gods is consistent with this understanding of old Hinduism and has no hidden interpretation. The gods too are subject to the order of the universe and through seduction try to draw *sakti* from a woman¹¹. From these beliefs springs all the lore of sexually explicit Hindu mythology which in time is given new allegorical interpretations. As the authors themselves point out, in the mid-1870s Navalar delivered lectures on Teyvayanai and Valli at the Nallur Kantacuvami Temple, giving a version of the Kantapurānam that was "sanitized and anti-erotic" and became "acculturated in a process that occurred gradually over the years." The missionaries simply saw the original intended meaning of the myths. And it would appear that even the Hindus of the time could not see the hidden meaning that the authors claim to see; for in their own words, "The real rascals were the Saivites themselves (brahmins and other temple officiants in particular) who ought to have known what Kantapurānam meant above the narrative level."¹²

¹⁰ Meaning with permanently erect penis, as the authors inform us.

¹¹ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (VI, 4:2-3): "Prajapati (the Lord of Creation) thought to himself: 'Let me provide the firm foundation.' So he created woman. When he created her, he honoured her below. Therefore one should honor woman below. He stretched out for himself that stone which projects [the Siva lingam]. With that he impregnated her. Her lap is a sacrificial altar; her hairs the sacrificial grass; her skin, the soma-press. The two lips of the yoni [vagina] are the fire in the middle. Verily, indeed, as great as is the world of the person who performs the vajapeya sacrifice [the drink of strength], just as great is the world of him who practices sexual intercourse knowing this. He takes the good deeds of women to himself. But he who practises sexual intercourse without knowing this - women take his good deeds for themselves."

¹² p. 168. After centuries of colonialist history there is much guilt among western intellectuals about the past. Coupled with the social decay that has come about in the West as result of a well-provided life-style, there is also insecurity. As Arnold Toynbee has pointed out about Rome in her time of decay, there is a tendency to copy the civilisations that are outside, "defeated." Hence today, Western movies have Easterners with "hidden wisdom," a sixth sense as in the karate movies where a westerner studies under an easterner and is empowered. The finding of hidden meanings in eastern lore falls in the same genre and, in a sense, is patronising of the East by western liberals. I was amazed recently when I saw *Kali*, the goddess, being given a new interpretation based on the "hidden wisdom" of the East. *Kali*, the embodiment of female *sakti*, is always depicted in opposition to Siva and thus as an

The authors who have unfairly accused the missionaries of "bias" may therefore be fairly accused of bias against the missionaries and Christianity itself. It is particularly difficult to understand their statement "The Bible ... invariably distorts religions of a contrastive character when viewed through its gridwork¹³," especially their use of the word invariably.

Second, continuing with my three criticisms of the book, the authors argue that the Christian missionary enterprise was soundly defeated by the revivalists. I am not convinced that this is indeed so. A parallel situation goes back to the Buddhist challenge to Vedic Hinduism. It is widely acknowledged that the way in which the Hindu revivalists of 600 to 1000 AD "triumphed" was by making many tenets of Buddhism (such as vegetarianism and the dismissing of Vedic ritual) their own. Thus, although Buddhism was "crushed," its ideas continued to flourish within Hinduism. Similarly, it may be argued that Christian expansion was blunted only after Christian ideas were syncretized with Hinduism – who is the Hindu today who is not for monotheism, monogamy, and, at least in public, the equality of men? Nonetheless, the applicability of the Hindu-Buddhist simile to the Hindu-Christian confrontation is not total since Christianity demands a personal faith in Christ, not simply a commitment to the social ethics and the justice system that flow from Christianity.

Thirdly, in faulting the book, I would lump many minor shortcomings together. The authors, after explaining that they have treated Jaffna separately from Sri Lanka because there was no "pan-Lankan reaction" to Christianity, have spoken of many Indian reactions that have little to do with Jaffna. There is non-standard use of quotation marks and as a result, a quoted passage from page 170 to page 172 does not appear to be a quotation, until one suddenly sees the ending quotation mark. And the authors use many terms not found in ordinary dictionaries¹⁴ and Latin and even

ugly ogress with her tongue hanging out. In the presentation under discussion, a statue of Kālī with her tongue hanging-out and her stepping upon Siva, was given the new interpretation that she had accidentally trampled on Siva and was biting her tongue as if to say, "Oh, what have I done!" Another aspect of these discoveries of "hidden wisdom" is the nature of modern research where new things need to be said simply for a publication!

¹³ p. 74. On a personal note, I know, respect and like the second author, the Right Reverend S. Jebanesan, Bishop of the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India, and am a good friend of his. I do not find many of the views expressed in the book in accord with what I know of him, although the book extensively uses the word "we." His is, after all, the temporal head of a Church in Sri Lanka that is aggressively evangelical, to the point of demanding the baptism of the whole family for the admission of a child to Jaffna College; excommunicating parents when their children marry outside their faith; and pulling up priests who attend Hindu ceremonies. Obviously the vast scholarship in sifting through the material from Jaffna, is Bishop Jebanesan's, especially from his doctoral research. But it would appear unfortunate, that he at some point, because of his extensive administrative duties and the difficulties of communication from Jaffna in the present circumstances, lost control in writing the book. For, I do not believe he would subscribe to the view that the Bible *invariably* distorts other religions; nor would he excuse so kindly the married Murukan' rape of Valli as a natural expression of love.

¹⁴ I refer to words like bricoleur, schema, theodicy, xenological, chthonic, *preparatio evangelica*, etc.

German expression in whose place ordinary English would have been greatly welcomed by ordinary readers like myself to make the reading smoother.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the book is a very important landmark in the literature and is sure to be welcomed by scholars and ordinary readers alike.