



Love and Revolutions: Market Women and Social Change in India

Eloise Hiebert Meneses

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The market women of India are poor, female, and untouchable (Dalit), all highly stigmatized statuses. They eek out a living for themselves and their children by doing "penny capitalism." Traditionally, the Hindu cosmology of hierarchy and stasis has circumscribed women's and Dalits' lives with notions of purity and pollution. But, since the advent of nineteenth century Protestant missions, a social reform movement has challenged traditional forms of debasement and exploitation. Still, Dalit communities are responding to unprecedented political opportunities by taking a socially conservative path. They are attempting to demonstrate their value by emulating higher caste practices. One of these practices is the giving of dowry. So, market women are painfully saving large amounts of money to marry off their daughters with dowries, thereby reinforcing Hindu values. Christianity advocates an ethic based on Jesus' two commandments, love God and love your neighbor as yourself. That ethic has influenced market women's lives more than they know through the construction of the Indian political arena. However, counter-forces are also evident in the public culture. Fundamentalist Hinduism, responding in part to the threat of global capitalism, is actively resisting these reforms and calling all Indians to a national identity that amalgamates race, language, and territory with Hinduism. In such a context, market women's conservative response to stigmatization is counterproductive to their own interests. A more revolutionary response, one based on the Christian ethic of love, would offer them unprecedented freedom and dignity. This work explores changes in the treatment of the marginalized in Indian society and relates them to contemporary global issues.

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