

BOOK REVIEWS

Religion in India

Edited by N. Madan

xvii + 460 pp., References

Oxford University Press, New Delhi, (1992)

Rs. 150/- (Paperback)

Before Madan's edited *Religion in India* existed no other volume that brought together almost all the important readings on different facets of Indian religions at one place. This collection is one of the Oxford in India Readings in Sociology and Social Anthropology. In his Preface to the Enlarged Paperback Edition, the Editor reiterates that his effort is principally for the teacher and the student. The book as a whole does not propose any theses or grand conclusions (p-xiii), except those arrived at by different authors in their individual contributions.

Madan's Introduction to the book is lucid and offers a comprehensive view of various approaches to the study of religion. It also includes a summary of various religions in India, showing a continuity between them which is a product of inter-religious interactions going on for the last many centuries.

Well known to the disciplinarians in sociology and anthropology is the debate regarding the definition of religion. One of the views is that rather than defining religion, we should focus on what it does in society. A definition must withstand the rigors of scientific method. Defining religion may be difficult because it deals with both subjective and objective aspects on the one hand, and on the other, it permeates all the other institutions in simple societies. The distinction between 'religion' and 'non-religion' (or between 'religion' and 'secular') may not truly exist in such societies. Religion does not differentiate itself from other institutions, as we find in modern contexts.

The other view is that it is possible to define religion. The definition arrived so will be applicable even to those societies where exists the 'religious context of behaviour' and not 'religious institution'. Both Durkheim and Weber submitted that the definition of religion should come at the end of the study. Although Durkheim used the concept of 'sacred' for defining religion and distinguishing it from other institutions, it has now become central to sociological discourse.

For assembling a book of readings on religion, Madan also opts for the notion of 'sacred', however he does not define it. The reader is initially not clear whether the meaning of sacred adopted here is faithfully Durkheimian, or deviates from it. But after going through the entire work, it seems that for Madan, as was for Durkheim, sacred is a matter of attitude. This quality is superimposed on a certain ensemble of sociological facts, be they phenomena, events, people, actions, or places. In this sense, Durkheim's influence on Madan is unmistakable, although he does not argue in favour of a dichotomous view - sacred as opposed to profane (p-2).

The readings are classified into five sections; the first four deal with various aspects of the 'sacred' - Sacred Knowledge, Sacred Space, Sacred Time and Sacred Persona. The last one is titled 'Reorientations to the Sacred', which is concerned with the changing attitudes of people to sacred entities. This section not only gives a glimpse of the changes in religion, but also the way in which the people's political aspirations make them rally around religion, thus sowing the seeds of communalism and fundamentalism, the two important aspects of the late twentieth century India. In addition, Madan's volume has an appendix on Zoroastrian myth and rituals.

By 'sacred knowledge', Madan understands 'knowledge that may be considered sacred in it self by virtue of its source, form and content' (p-23). A fine example of this is the knowledge contained in the Quran, which is 'verbally revealed' (p-27). Included in this volume is an excellent piece on the Holy Book of the Muslims from Fazlur Rahman's *Islam*. Apart from this, the other contents of Sacred Knowledge are typically anthropological. Dumont's well-known paper on Aiyana is excerpted here. Mathur's lesser known work is opted for the concepts of *karma* and *dharma*. Pocock's description of evil eye in Gujarat is highly readable. On purity and pollution, another set of concepts popularized by Dumont, is included here Kolenda's writing. Though everything can not be included in some kind of a 'ready-reckoner' volume, one would have expected something on auspiciousness and inauspiciousness for the confusion between these concepts and those of purity and pollution keeps plaguing studies on Indian cosmology. Madan's seminal paper in Marglin and Carman's edited *Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society* (1985) should have been considered for inclusion.

There may not be a better introduction to sacred space than to begin with a description of the Toda dairy. Anthony Walker, the author of this piece, has a place of pride among modern ethnographers. The second reading on space in the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, shows the fusion of two modes of worship — the official worship and the other by individual worshipers - in this temple. Written in the phenomenological vein, Ann Gold's excerpts from *Fruitful Journeys*, a highly acclaimed book on Rajasthani pilgrims, describe the meaning of the people's journey to Hardwar for sinking ashes (euphemistically called 'flowers') of the dead. Though a lot of work exists on Kashi, Madan has rightly chosen to include Eck's work on this city of cosmogeny in

this volume. The section on Sacred Space culminates with a structural treatment of space in ritual by Veena Das.

Sacred Time is the third section. Like space, for believers, every time is good for memorizing the name(s) of the divine powers, but rituals can not be performed at all places and at all times. Religious rituals, in contrast to the typical magical ones, are calendrical in nature; they are fixed in advance. Oster's study of a Bengali town is known to us. The first chapter in this section is from his *The Play of Gods*; it deals with Durga Puja. Oster says: "The idea of puja is built around service, respect and honour", and shows how these attitudes are expressed ritually. An account of the Car Festival in Puri included here is from Marglin's *Wives of the God-King*. An old piece on *mangala* by Srinivas is also added here.

Especially written for this volume is John Cort's article on Svetambara Jains. It is one of the best writings on Jainism. The last ten years or so have witnessed an increase in the anthropological studies of Jain society and its religion, particularly because of the works of Caroline Humphrey, Michael Carrithers, Marcus Banks, James Laidlaw, Paul Dundas and recently, Lawrence Babb. These anthropologists have tried to cover Jains in different parts of India, although not many studies concentrate on Digambara in general and more especially in South India. Cort's paper is on Jains in Patan (Gujarat). Some of his observations - such as on cleanliness in a Jain temple, non-Jains employed as *pujari*, indistinguishable *murtis* of Jina, differences between male and female pujas, etc. - are of great interest, and may be picked up for comparing the Hindu with the Jain puja.

Two final pieces in Sacred Time concern popular Islam. One is by Saiyid on Moharram, based on his field work in the Konkan region of Maharashtra state. The second is by Currie. His writing on a pilgrimage to Ajmer - to the shrine of Muin

al-din Chisti - shows the transformation of the great saint from a religious mendicant (*darvish*) to an idealised *shaykh* - the 'Prophet of India' (p-247). Motives for the pilgrimage are also listed here. However, it would have been more illuminating if the motives were analyzed according to the religious identity of the pilgrims for this *dargah*, like that of many other saints, is visited by people of all religions and their respective aims differ.

Although a separate article on renunciators is not included in Madan's volume, Uberoi's essay on Sikh symbols gives some idea about renunciation in the Hindu thought. The other articles included in this section on Religious Persona are by Elwin, Babb, Fuller and Vidyarthi.

On Saora shamans is Elwin's article from *The Religion of an Indian Tribe*. A representative of classical ethnological approach, it is highly readable. However, one would like to make a distinction between the 'shaman' and the 'spirit-medium'. The religious personnels Elwin describes are spirit-mediums and not shamans as they are understood in Inner Asia. A recent account of possession and divination among the Saora is by Piers Vitebsky, titled *Dialogues with the Dead*, which may be of interest to readers. Here also the distinction between the shaman and the spirit-medium is not attempted. Like Elwin, Vitebsky also uses the term shaman.

Babb's *Redemptive Encounters*, from which is excerpted the piece on Satya Sai Baba, is a well researched study of religious movements and cults of modern Hinduism. Equally popular is Fuller's work on the priests in Minakshi Temple. Excerpts from this book tell us of the position of Brahmin priests in Hindu society. In line with J.C. Heesterman, Fuller also shows that priestly occupation does not elevate the status of Brahmin. Placed above priesthood is renunciation. Also attempted by Fuller is a hierarchy of Brahmin priests. Temple

priests are higher to those who officiate at the rituals of householders. Those who serve upper castes are superior to those serving the lower. At the bottom are placed the Mahabrahmin, the funeral priests. Incidentally, Jonathan Parry's work on funeral priests of Banaras would have enriched this volume.

The last piece is on Gayawal Brahmins. Written by L.P.Vidyarthi, the anthropologist at Ranchi who popularized the concept of sacred complex, it is a simple narration of the priests of Gaya. An important observation is that given an opportunity, the Gayawals would like to shift to prestigious, and more remunerative, occupations. Besides lowering their status, they find that a total dependance on priesthood is not economically speaking, a viable proposition. Surely, they would not wish their sons to follow the traditional occupation.

The last section of this volume takes up the multifarious aspects of religion in modern India. Saberwal defines the concept of communalism. On the basis of his study of Lucknow leather-workers, Khare discusses the role of radical ascetics in providing a counter-ideology to Brahmanism. Caplan's article shows that Protestant fundamentalism in urban south India has emerged in the context of a particular set of social and political circumstances. The case of religious violence in Punjab is discussed by Juergensmeyer. This section ends with Madan's much-discussed article on secularism. He thinks that secularism "as an ideology has emerged from the dialectic of modern science and the rise of rationalism" (p-403). Because it is an 'alien cultural ideology', it has "failed to make the desired headway in India" (pp-407-408). He proposes a rethinking of those ideas which are 'fuzzy' and secularism is one of them.

To sum up, Madan's endeavour is comparable to the famous Lessa and Vogt's edited *Reader in Comparative Religion*, which

is still a useful collection of papers on different theoretical perspectives on religion.

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Social Stratification

Edited by Dipankar Gupta
xvii + 518 pp., References
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Second and Enlarged Edition (1992)
Rs. 150/- (Paperback).

Dipankar Gupta's edited volume on social stratification will be useful to graduate and post-graduate students in anthropology and sociology. Some of the important readings the students need to read as part of their curriculum in Indian universities are included in this book. One of the appendices is Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore's 1945 paper which is imperative for understanding the functional view of social stratification. Excerpts from Max Weber's work on the relationship between class, status, and party, constitute another appendix.

The title of this volume does not commit itself to any particular ethnographic region. However, barring the three appendices (two mentioned earlier and the third on the Marxian method of class analysis), which are completely theoretical, and the Editor's introduction, which at places touches upon the theoretical issues, rest of the papers are on India. To make this clear, this volume might have been titled, *Social Stratification in India*, although it may be argued that since it is published under the auspices of Oxford in India Readings, its Indian bias is implicit.

In his introductory note, the Editor observes that while speaking of social stratification in India, most of us tend to concentrate almost exclusively on caste (p.2). A common belief is that caste is a pan-Indian phenomenon, almost the identifying charac-

teristic of Indians. In a narrow sense - understood in religious terms - it is a Hindu institution, and in a broad sense - understood as a principle of social organization - it exists even amongst non-Hindu societies, including those sectarian groups which emerged as contrapuntal ideal types to caste hierarchy. A lot of literature is available on castes amongst the Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, and Muslims; this volume includes Fuller's 1976 paper on Kerala Christians and Ahmed's 1973 work on Siddique Sheikhs of Allahabad.

The assumption that it is hard to conceptualize India without caste has generated a plethora of writings - of all shades - on it. Not only that, this assumption has also thwarted work on other principles of stratification: an example here is of class. No sociologist would deny the existence of classes in rural and urban India, but only a few have analytically separated classes and examined their dynamics. Such an effort is to be distinguished from the one where politico-economic dimensions of rural India are studied under the cover of caste. An apt example of this is the concept of dominant caste.

The bias of Indian sociologists in favour of caste is seen in this volume as well. Of the twenty-nine papers and four appendices (apart from the Editor's introduction), fifteen are explicitly on caste, and a bulk of papers arranged under the rubric 'Caste, Class and Conflict' deal with caste in myriad forms. Excerpts from Dumont's *Homo hierarchicus*, the last appendix of this volume, are also concerned with caste. Under the head 'Class' are arranged six papers, of which one deals with a tribe of Gujarat.

Most of the papers included here are well known to students of sociology and anthropology; this, however, does not imply that they should not be reprinted. But, along with those that present seminal ideas and every student must read them closely - such as the writings of Srinivas, Beteille, Madan and

Dumont on caste - the volume might have considered some recent writings for inclusion. Excerpts from Raheja's *The Poison in the Gift* deserve room in a volume on social stratification in India. Some old writings also deserve consideration: for instance, Hocart's *Caste*, Marriott and Inden's paper on Caste Systems in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Furthermore, Beteille has written extensively on caste, agrarian categories, the issues of reservation, dynamics of class and power, after his 1965 book, from which two pieces have been included in this book. One of his recent writings on the aforementioned themes should also have been included. And, does not a book on social stratification deserve a section on the theme of equality? Perhaps, some writings on caste, included here, should have been deleted, to create space for recent ideas on inequality and equality.

One more problem. This pertains to bibliographic details. I think we should be careful about the year of publication of a particular work. Needless to say, in a critical enquiry of any work, we always refer to the time of its publication. Let me give two examples to substantiate my point.

In an article titled 'Continuous Hierarchies and Discrete Castes', the author cites Blunt (1969) (p.126). [The reference, however, is of Blunt (1960), a mistake that should have been corrected.] We all know that Blunt's *The Caste System of Northern India with Special Reference to the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh* was originally published by Oxford University Press (London) in 1931. A neophyte who does not know this will consider Blunt a 'recent' writer, and will be misled on his contextualization of this work in temporal dimension. Blunt's reference (in p.495) does not indicate that the work was *reprinted* (and not *originally published*) by the Indian publisher.

Today a large number of old books have been reprinted by Indian publishers. Some of them do not include the original publication

details. For instance, Elwin's *The Baiga* has been reprinted by Gian Publishing House. The year of its first reprint in India (1986) is given, but not when it was first published. Vast differences exist between an ethnography published in 1939 and one in 1986. The publishers are callous about these facts; the authors/editors should not be.

Similarly, Bougle's piece included in this volume was originally published in the form of a book in French in 1908; and the English translation of its introduction appeared in *Contribution to Indian Sociology* in 1958. This fact needs to be kept in mind while reading Bougle.

East of the four sections which comprise the volume is preceded by a summary of the papers included therein. These introductory notes are profitable when critical and include recent ideas about the debate that centres around the concepts in vogue. For example, a lot has been written on the limitation and usefulness of the concept of dominant caste; this volume says nothing about it. Discussion of various issues in the introductory notes is more stimulating than a plain (and often uninspiring) summary of the articles that follow.

To sum up, *Social Stratification* is a useful collection; but Beteille's *Social Inequality* is still unparalleled.

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Physician to the Gene Pool : Genetic Lessons and Other Stories

By James V. Neel

x + 457 pp. *Figures, References*

John Wiley & Sons, Sussex, U.K. (1994)

\$ 24.95 (Hardcover)

This book is much more than a lively memoir. In the first 250 pages of the book, the reader gets a guided-tour of human genetics — complete with historical and per-

sonal anecdotes, the logic of the science, major goals and achievements — by one of the tallest human geneticists of this century. The remaining half of the book, which is "the primary objective of this book", is devoted to the laying out of priorities in the application of genetic principles to human affairs. I would like to forewarn the intending reader that the simple title of the book is very deceptive: the book is not for bedtime reading; it is packed with logic, principles, information and thought-provoking ideas. Many, many pages of the book have to be re-read for a clear understanding.

James V. Neel, who is currently the Lee R. Dice Distinguished University Professor Emeritus of Human Genetics and Professor Emeritus of Internal Medicine at the University of Michigan, started his career in *Drosophila* genetics at Wooster College (Ohio) and later worked with Curt Stern to obtain his Ph. D. degree from the University of Rochester. He was quickly attracted to human genetics, in spite of (or was it because of?) the fact that the field was replete with "incredibly sloppy and biased studies." Early on, Neel realized that medical training is essential to serious human genetics research. He went back to the Medical School of the University of Rochester and completed his M.D. degree in 1946. Soon after, he was contacted by Lee R. Dice to expand a fledgling research and counselling programme in human genetics at the University of Michigan. Neel accepted the offer. The University of Michigan quickly became one of the leading international centres of human genetics research.

The first major contributions of Jim Neel in human genetics were the deciphering of the genetics of thalassaemia and sickle cell anaemia. While these haemoglobin disorders were then clinically recognized and their tendency to aggregate in families was noted, the distribution of "mild" and "severe" states within families remained a puzzle in the early 1940s. Neel conducted family studies and

proved his hypothesis that mutant homozygotes were clinically severe, while heterozygotes were mild. From these beginnings, haemoglobin disorders are now the most well-documented of all genetic disorders.

Neel decided it was time to move on to other territories. Fifteen months after Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed, Neel landed in Japan as a member of a small team to make recommendations to the National Academy of Science about the feasibility of undertaking studies on radiation effects. Within a few months, Neel conducted some pilot studies and submitted a preliminary proposal to undertake studies on genetic effects of radiation. The study was endorsed by the Committee on Atomic Casualties and "Lt. Neel was directed to organize that study forthwith." Neel undertook the study which was to become one of the most significant studies in human genetics. The study continues even to this day! During the course of this study, a vast amount of data on birth defects were collected and a very large number of genetic tests were performed. The analyses of these data have revealed "small but far, far from significant differences between children of the radiation-exposed and the unexposed. These differences were, however, more often in the direction of a radiation effect than not." The study has also rejected J.B.S. Haldane's suggestion "that human genes were so sensitive to the effects of radiation that as little as 10r, or even 3r, would double the present mutation rate." In fact, as Neel has pointed out, "the gene pool is tough ... perhaps 95-98% of the radiation-induced damage is repaired" by DNA repair mechanisms that are not yet completely understood. The effects of radiation on human has been discussed in fair detail in this book against the backdrop of the A-bomb study. The discussion includes problems in extrapolating radiation-effects from one dose level to another within and between species, estimation of mutation rates and other related problems.

One of the major findings of this study has been that the doubling dose was estimated to be approximately five times higher than current standards based on the mouse work. [In a recent personal conversation on 15 May 1995, Dr. Neel mentioned to me that this finding has had a major policy impact. The United Nations Scientific Committee on Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have accepted the revised estimates and have now agreed to rewrite the relevant sections of their reports.]

A major "fallout" of the A-bomb study was a study on effects of inbreeding. The practice of cousin marriages was fairly common in Japan. W.J. Schull, who had joined Neel in conducting the A-bomb effects study, and Neel decided to take advantage of the favourable circumstances to also conduct a comprehensive study on inbreeding effects, and the data are still "widely used in genetic counselling when the question is the outcome of a consanguineous marriage." Deleterious effects of inbreeding were estimated; estimates were also obtained on "inbreeding depression." However, the estimated effects were lower than reported in many previous studies. Neel has devoted 20 pages of the book (Chapter 6) in describing this study.

"By the late 1950s ... the program in Japan was enjoying a (temporary) lull. There was time to think about new directions." Neel began his studies on "gene pool genetics", genetics of populations, among Amerindian tribes of South America. The poor understanding of the operation of natural selection and the balance between mutation and selection motivated him to undertake these studies. Disease is an important agent of natural selection. Neel and his group undertook extensive medical studies among the Yanomama. The Yanomama appeared as healthy as any U.S. population. The great majority of the diseases to which these Indians were exposed were endemic, rather than

epidemic. Their small and isolated populations do not present the conditions that support epidemic disease. Based on these studies, Neel has challenged the medical dogma that isolated tribal populations of the world have an inborn susceptibility to epidemic diseases of the civilization, such as measles, smallpox, TB and syphilis. The Yanomama did not appear to suffer from malnutrition. They, like most other tribals of the world, ate almost any form of animal protein. Thus, chronic protein deficiency seems to have been rare in early human populations. In separate chapters in the book, Neel has also described the findings and implications of his studies on demography and genetic micro differentiation studies. Neel has supported Sewall Wright's shifting balance theory of evolution. In a section of Chapter 11, Neel has criticized the concept of "punctuated equilibrium." "This section is interesting and important. Neel says that "... the equilibrium aspect of the concept gives me no less difficulty than the punctuated."

Mutation is the creator of genetic variability and a major driving force of evolution. Neel's contributions to the understanding of the nature and extent of human mutation has been phenomenal. Having studied the effects of radiation on mutation rates, it was only natural for Neel to undertake studies on "spontaneous mutation" among the Yanomama. Chapter 12 of this book provides an account of these studies. With the advent of civilization, industrialization, and all the attendant new, potentially mutagenic exposures, one would expect mutation rates to have vastly increased from among the Yanomama to the inhabitants of New Delhi. But, Neel states that "the current data provide no reason to believe that mutation rates have generally increased," indicating that the genome is generally resistant to genetic effects of mutagens. Neel's studies on "gene pool genetics" have provided valuable insights into genetic processes, "but our oppor-

tunities to conduct many kinds of population studies are rapidly vanishing," laments Neel.

The first half of the book, dealing primarily with Neel's own research, is serious but entertaining too. The style of writing is such that the reader also gets a good feel of the excitement and adventure that were a part and parcel of Neel's research efforts. Many lighter incidents that invariably are a part of anthropological fieldwork are described succinctly, but interestingly.

The second-half of the book is devoted to laying out priorities of what human genetics has to offer to society. Neel strongly believes that "the geneticist has to be ever sensitive to the societal implications of his new knowledge." He, however, is worried that "... the great current emphasis on the prospects of gene therapy may create a public attitude toward human geneticists where they are seen as gene jockeys or gene mechanics, rather than taking the broader view of the genetic problems of populations" (quoted from a letter written to me by Professor Neel on June 9, 1992). This half comprising six chapters are philosophical and deal with public policy issues. The contents of these chapters are aptly described by their titles: "Just too many people," "Some longer-range problems for the gene pool," "Assessment of genetic risk," "Genetic medicine for populations," "Genetic medicine for individuals," and "Physician to the gene pool." Every paragraph of these chapters is heavy; many have to be re-read for a clear appreciation of his thoughts. In these chapters, Neel repeatedly discusses our transition from stone-age cultures to the present urban cultures and emphasizes the major impacts of urbanization on our diet and disease patterns, and psychological characteristics and well-being. Neel's greatest concern is that there are now "Just too many people." He recommends that "decreasing the gene pool to a sustainable size" should have the highest priority. He has no kind words to offer to those opposed to population control

and abortion. Neel pleads with the reader to be an active advocate of population control. He, however, states that while the pressure of population is depleting resources and creating ecological imbalances at an accelerating pace, the cultures of many developed nations — which generally have lower birth rates than the developing nations — are such that the negative impact of a birth in these nations on global ecology and resource is many times greater than the corresponding impact of a birth in the developing nations. The negative impact on ecology (air and water pollution, depletion of the ozone layer, etc.) is expected to increase mutation rates. Although Neel's own research has shown that the genome is quite resistant to mutation, Neel advocates control measures — such as, reducing the production of and exposure to environmental mutagens — to keep mutation rates as low as possible. Neel's second priority is "to attempt, within the resources available, to optimize the expression of all genotypes." He proposes the widespread use of genetic counseling, prenatal diagnosis and treatment of genetic diseases — primarily by regulation of diet and other environmental interventions — to achieve this. Neel is extremely critical of gene therapy, even of somatic cell gene therapy. Neel notes that the current preoccupation with all things DNA has negatively impacted on support for human genetics research at the population level, and proposes that some of the research-funding from "hard, molecular genetic science" be redirected to the study of human genetics at the population level. This proposal will surely raise many eyebrows. He, of course, provides cogent arguments for each of his objectives and priorities.

I greatly enjoyed reading the book, and I strongly recommend the book to anyone who is interested in human genetics — the science and its social implications.

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