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Understanding Indian religion on its own terms

PINKNEY, ANDREA MARION & JOHN WHALEN-BRIDGE (eds). Religious journeys in India: pilgrims, tourists, and travelers. xiv, 323 pp., illus., bibliogrs. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2018. £90.00 (cloth)


The goal of doing anthropological research and sharing its ethnographic results is to learn more about and better understand the world(s) in which we live, and the human and nonhuman others with whom we share our existence. As anthropologists, we aim to understand the lifeworlds of those others – whether they are close to us, or as far removed as one could possibly imagine. As Margaret Mead once wrote, anthropology teaches us ‘the open-mindedness with which one must look and listen, record in astonishment and wonder, that which one would not have been able to guess’ (1977: p. iv). As a result, anthropological writing is usually filled with ethnographic descriptions of places, relationships, and events from bottom-up perspectives. The joy of reading ethnographic works reflects this. Good ethnographies guide us into the lifeworlds of others and help us understand their lives – if only for a brief moment. In this regard, the monograph by Tulasi Srinivas and the edited volume by Andrea Marion Pinkney and John Whalen-Bridge are both equally marvellous, engaging, and enriching to read, albeit for different reasons.

After nearly two decades of visiting and doing research in Bangalore, India (at first supervised by her father), Srinivas has finally published her monograph on Hindu ritual life. The result is an ethnographically detailed, amazing book that fully describes the lives of devotees and the devoted, engaged in practices and processes of wonder in temples at Malleshwaram, Bangalore. The title, The cow in the elevator, already draws one into the narrative. One wants to know who this cow is or what it represents, why the cow is standing in an elevator, and what this has to do with anthropology. Luckily, these questions are answered in the first chapter. By then, the reader is already so absorbed in the narrative that putting the book down is nearly impossible. As one reads on, one realizes that the monograph itself is just as complex as the fieldwork site Srinivas describes, and the result of a long and winding road of human and divine encounters and theoretical reflections.

The chapters deal consecutively with what Srinivas sees as the significant forces behind neoliberalism: space, mobility, emotion, money, technology, and time. In each chapter, she shows how these neoliberal forces impact on ritual, and vice versa. The stories she describes are truly remarkable and at times humorous. The only thing that could be seen as missing is an overview of the anthropology of wonder as it has developed in the past decade. While Srinivas acknowledges many theorists primarily of a Western background, from a variety of disciplines such as philosophy, religious studies, and sociology, perhaps she could have written more on how this debate.

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has developed within anthropology, for example by Michael Scott (2016, 2017) and Jaap Timmer and Matt Tomlinson (2019).

Srinivas's concept of wonder is the main thread through the book, the etymology of which she traces back to the German word for fracture (Wunder, p. 11). As she makes abundantly clear, it evokes ritual creativity, transformation, and dynamism. This wonder and creativity are crucial to the development of religion, perhaps especially so in a highly modernized, quickly changing, urban and neoliberal environment such as Bangalore. Srinivas argues that the desired result of modern rituals is fracture. With this insight, she wishes to critique the prevailing image of Indian religion, which generally emphasizes tradition and stability. Change and modern life lead to religious improvisation and creativity. Instead of this being seen as detrimental to ritual and tradition, Srinivas shows how it strengthens religious beliefs in the modern, neoliberal city. This is a valuable new insight into Indian religion, and one that needs more attention, especially in the discipline of religious studies.

To support this analysis, Srinivas chooses to place emphasis on the functional elaboration of ritual. She asks ‘what ritualists do, along with … what they say they do’ (p. 32, Srinivas's italics). By focusing on these questions, she contends that we can get ‘beyond the horizon of religious studies’ (p. 32). What this means remains unfortunately something that might need more elaboration. It appears as if Srinivas is arguing that by analysing rituals from a functional perspective, it becomes clear that rites are more than just pragmatic actions aiming towards a clear goal. Likewise, it demonstrates how religion moves beyond the traditional and becomes a template for and of change. As a result, religion is not a well-defined, organized institution, but a ‘living and breathing discipline’ (p. 210). In other words, ritual is about what it is, not what it does. As such, ritual is creativity – or perhaps creativity in itself is ritual.

Most interesting for an added critical analysis is The cow in the elevator's concluding chapter. Instead of summarizing the findings that are displayed clearly and in full detail throughout the monograph, Srinivas chooses to use this chapter as a platform to formulate her ideas on and wishes for the discipline of anthropology. She argues we should not only study wonder, but also let it be part of our anthropological inquiry. This will allow us to understand creativity, human endurability and survivability, and joy and hope, especially in bleak circumstances. In a radically changing world, we need wonder to understand the Other and ourselves in positive and enlightened ways.

The same optimism is seen in the edited volume on pilgrimage and religious travel in India by Pinkney and Whalen-Bridge. Religious journeys in India is interdisciplinary and interreligious. The contributors are from Europe, the United States, Australia, and Asia, and include anthropologists, sociologists, historians, English language and literature scholars, religious studies and international relations specialists, amongst others. The chapters cover pilgrimages and travel in Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, local Indian religions, Christianity, Sikhism, and new religious movements. Consequently, the contributions are diverse in many different ways: historical and contemporary; ethnographically detailed and theoretically dense; primarily focusing on pilgrimage sites and on pilgrims. The variety feels lively and provides something interesting for everybody who reads it.

In addition to this vast variety, all the chapters share one common thread: a focus on and elaboration of the once strictly held divide between pilgrimage (or religious travel) and tourism (or travel for leisure). This takes place over three separate sections. The first, 'Constructing community spaces' , describes pilgrimage sites as social sites, where identities are shaped in both 'religious' and 'secular' ways. The authors in the second section, 'Pilgrimage as paradox', describe pilgrimage sites that are characterized by a cognitive dissonance, such as holy sites that have become nationalist activist sites; sites that are marked by spiritual vacuums; sites in which the boundaries between the spiritual and the commercial become blurred; and sites that are perhaps more symbolic than actual. The last section, 'Reversals and revisions', deals with the question of which multiple and sometimes overlapping motivations are behind pilgrimage sites and pilgrims' actions, such as economic means, personal interpretations of scriptures, the mobility of sacredness itself, and reversals of the self.

The collection's goal is briefly mentioned in the introduction's last paragraph, where Pinkney and Whalen-Bridge comment that 'by looking beyond the boundaries of conventional pilgrimages, we invite readers to join us at the margins of scholarship on religion and travel – and to appreciate India on its own terms as a religious travel destination and as a landscape for religious constructions, paradoxes, and, indeed, reversals' (p. 7, my emphasis). This mirrors the intention of Srinivas's monograph, as she also aims to understand India on its own terms. Apparently, as Pinkney and Whalen-Bridge argue, this can only be done in comparison with – or perhaps even in contradiction to – conventional images of India. As it remains underexplored what the 'conventional' is, the question of what it means to get to know India 'on its own terms' (p. 7) lingers throughout the book. Religious journeys in India would have been strengthened in this regard by a longer, more elaborate theoretical introduction, or a concluding section that tied the chapters together. It is a shame to see that a significant amount of thought has been put into dividing the chapters into clear and sensible sections, but less effort has been made to construct an overarching theoretical framework. This may be the reason why in many
chapters authors fall back on ‘conventional’ theories on pilgrimage, religion, ritual, and travel, such as the work by Benedict Anderson (1983), Ian Reader (2005; 2007), Paul Ricoeur (2004), and Victor and Edith Turner (E. Turner 2005; V. Turner 1969, 1982; V. Turner & E. Turner 1978).

This leads me to speculate about both books’ theoretical frameworks. Despite the turn to ‘world anthropologies’ or ‘de/postcolonial anthropology’ from the 1990s onwards, as scholars we often still engage almost primarily with theoretical debates and ideas which originate from the West. This might make it difficult to understand and communicate about the lives of people not living in the Occident. Insights from other societies are filtered through and perhaps in some ways coloured by debates that have their origin – and much of their more recent developments – in Western institutions. Western-based ideas and models have perhaps become so normalized that it is – or should be – clear enough what the ‘conventional’ and what analysing a cultural artefact ‘on its own terms’ entail and thus they do not warrant explanation. As such, both books (although the edited volume by Pinkney and Whalen-Bridge more so than the monograph by Srinivas) seem to strongly rely on that which they at the same time wish to activate against: a certain understanding of India and Indian religion which has become normalized in academia.

Regardless, what the books do clearly show is an understanding of Indian religion not as dark matter, but from the perspective of the ‘anthropology of the good’ (Ortner 2016; 60; Robbins 2013: 448). The books show the light of and in Indian religions, not their dark sides. As good anthropological accounts, they open up our understanding of India, making it not ‘provincial’ or ‘traditional’, but very much part of our modern, globalized world. As such, both volumes are extremely good books through which to explore a modernizing world that is not necessarily Western, but very much lived and experienced on its own terms.

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