

STUDY OF RELIGION IN ANCIENT INDIA

SOME RECENT APPROACHES

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The approaches to the study of religion in general and Indian religion in particular have over the years shown a growing sophistication and a close reflection of epistemological shifts in other major disciplines across the world. Therefore, while in some of the writings the Marxian tool of analysis seems to be the guiding spirit, many other researchers have borrowed their methodological framework from structuralism, semiotics, psychology, social anthropology and so on.

Debi Prasad Chattopadhyay hypothesized the predominance of the female principle in ancient India which provided the ideological basis of Tantricism. The importance of females rested on agriculture where the role of women was predominant. This gradually gave way to a pastoral Vedic society which accounted for the growth of patriarchy. This was a Marxian way of looking at religion.

DD Kosambi, another noted Marxist historian, uses the philosophy, the preaching, the syncretic view of the Bhagavad Gita to explain the material and political climate of the early Gupta age. The economic prosperity of the time was not just confined to the central authority but was in the possession of different economic groups which supported different sects. In the Gita, therefore, Kosambi sees an attempt to reconcile and synthesize the various schools of thought existing at the time. Besides, the Gita provided the moral, ideological requirement of the feudal society which was to grow later. Emphasizing the significance of bhakti, devotion, could give it a firm foundation.

Suvira Jaiswal traces the growth of Vaishnavism from the tribal practices of fourth century BC when the worship of Sankarsana and Vasudeva was aligned with Narayana. The earlier two were associated with the tribal goddess Ekanamsa. But as Vrsni tribe changed from being matrilineal to patriarchal the gods it worshipped also underwent a change. These cults were further fused into Bhagavatism to provide a wider social platform to include the lower varnas. The cult of Vasudeva-Narayana-Visnu of the epic and the Puranas had thus a socially integrative role to perform.

Another Marxist historian, RN Nandi, explains the dynamics of Brahman-Yajamana relations, the growth of pilgrimage and of monastic religion in terms of decay of urban centers, the decline in market economy and the feudal mode of production.

The application of psychoanalytical tools in the study of religion begins by examining the myths which it sees as similar in nature to dreams, both being the projections of the unconscious. In myths these projections are restructured according to the cultural requirements. Zimmer was the first historian to visualize this.

Sudhir Kakar examines the story associated with the life of Krishna in psychological framework. Maternity, according to him, provides the biggest transition in a woman's life which accounts for a shift in her longings from her husband to her son. This also presents a major psychological difficulty for the boy in whose fantasy she takes the form of a bad mother. It is this image of bad mother that the mystical story of Krishna sucking the life out of Putana's breast grapples with.

J. Moussaief Masson sees the exalted notion of the self to be the moving force behind the monastic renunciation one witnesses in ancient Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. It is reinforced by a rigorous repression of all natural yearnings. The wandering of the ascetic into the forest is seen in the same light. He cites the life of Buddha to underscore his point. All his teachings stem from his underlying depression at the state of suffering he saw all around himself.

Paul B. Courtright, however, examines the Ganesh myth in terms of family relationships. The ambivalence of the relationship is explained through the story of Ganesh in which the son is posited between the mother and the father. In such a battle to seek proximity the father defeats the son. In this story Parvati combines the role both of the good and the bad mother.

Anthropology, on the other hand, views religion as a cultural system. Religious symbols are a part of the social system. Religious systems are not just explanatory; they are also normative. They provide guidelines for the world.

Susan Wadley sees god-man relationship in terms of power. It is the superior power exercised by the gods that makes men submit to their authority. Through the study of the ritualistic practices of Karimpur village Wadley concludes that the rationale behind Vrata-Katha and the observance of rituals is the hope that such observances will confer blessings on people.

Hindu religious pantheon, according to Lawrence A. Babb, is composed of vast array deities having different social positions. Thus, while on the one hand, Parvati and Sita appear as wives and in a position subordinate to their husband, Lakshmi, even through married, stands alone. At the other end of the spectrum are the goddesses devoid of matrimony. Their nature is fiercer. It is they who receive blood sacrifices. Babb sees the goddesses of Chattisgarh to be closer to fierce divinities.

Rituals which form the core of Vedic religion are explained by Louis Renou as the tools that both gods and demons used to fight each other. Renou puts more emphasis on rituals and sacrifices as the essence of Vedic religion than its philosophical and mythological content. The rituals were observed with a specific purpose of seeking prosperity in life. Jan Gonda has made a voluminous study of elaborate rituals and the recitations associated with them. Making reference to Jaiminiya Grihasutra Gonda observes that rituals confer both material and spiritual benefits to the person.

In contrast, Frits Stall opines that by the time Vedic rituals reached their zenith the material and spiritual yearning came to be replaced by their codification into grihya and srauta sutras.

Heesterman sees the observance of agnihotra rituals as an attempt at self purification by purging the food a man consumes from any kind of contamination that it might have come to it in the process of acquiring it. This purification would have set the sun on its right course Heesterman further argues by making reference to pranagnihotra that rituals eventually came to be superseded by knowledge. Charles Malamoud finds a correspondence between the cosmic and the ritual elements which elevate Vedic rituals to the level of a science.

Myths have also lend themselves to different interpretations. The German school emphasizes the moralizing aspect of the myths, while Hindu theologians make a metaphysical interpretation. There are still others who see myths as just another way giving a historical account. O'Flaherty follows the 'text-historical method' to explain myths by tracing it to its earliest source. David R. Kinsley sees in the evolution of myths the connection between religion and play. This is how he explains the Krishna lila and refers to a Bengali saying: without Krishna there is no song. Benjamin Preciado-Solis sees a parallel between the stories of Krishna and other similar stories in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The contact with the Greeks from the time of Alexander could be the possible reason for such cultural exchanges. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's examining of the Siva myth shed light on the enduring human dilemma of a conflict between spiritual aspirations and human desires. Bailey sees the conflict between ritualism and asceticism as the one reflected in pravrittidharma and nivrttidharma.

Thomas B. Coburn finds in Devi Mahatmya composed around sixth century AD an attempt to present the ultimate reality as the feminine form. In Devi Mahatmya he sees the fusion and culmination of earlier Vedic and Puranic traditions.

A brief survey of the recent developments in the study of religion shows that there have been significant changes in this field from the earlier narrative style. But there are still some grounds that remain to be covered.

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