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Contemporary Indigeneity and Religion in India

Editorial

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Guest Editors

When we talk about contemporary indigeneity and religion in India, we are talking of around 100,000,000 people. This number is still a modest estimate for the more than 600 distinct groups in India, each with its own traditions, history, circumstances, and in some cases languages, that are encompassed by the word "indigenous". As a small sample, we present local studies of groups of people stretching from Gujarat in the west (see Alles in this volume) through Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha in central-eastern India (see the contributions of Beggiora, Guzy, Nadal and Skoda) to Arunachal Pradesh (see Scheid and Barkataki-Ruscheweyh) and Meghalaya (see Lyngdoh) in the northeast. They are the result of a collaboration between the editors that began in 2011 at the conference of the South and Southeast Asian Association for the Study of Religion and Culture in Thimphu, Bhutan and continues through the Adivasi Religion and Society Network (www.arsnetwork.org).

We hope that, at first glance, our title communicates a rough idea of the theme. The categories it invokes serve as approximate models that allow us to access the diversity of life worlds and world views of peoples in India. However, the terms we have chosen are not unproblematic.

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Indigenous peoples in India

The United Nations has refrained from adopting an official definition of "indigenous", but the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations provisionally defined indigenous people as

> those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and precolonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems (Cobo 1987).

In keeping with this definition, it is customary in many parts of the world to conceive of indigeneity in terms of people living in an area prior to European settlement. North America and Australia provide paradigmatic examples. In India the situation is considerably more complex (cf. Karlsson / Subba 2006). On the one hand, well-respected researchers like the sociologist André Béteille (1998) and the historian Sumit Guha (1999) have abstained from designating the people who interest us as indigenous, precisely because their priority of habitation is questionable. On the other hand, partisans of Hindutva ideology often claim that high-caste Hindus are the true indigenes of the Indian subcontinent (Baviskar 2006). As Alan Barnard (2006) has pointed out, "first come" and "cultural difference" need not be the most decisive criteria in determining indigeneity; it may be more appropriate to emphasize "non-dominance" and "self-ascription" instead (see also Devy et al. 2009). The anthropologist Richard Lee (2006: 134) has proposed that we need two different notions of indigenous, one for peoples subjected to European colonial invasion and another for people subject not to European settler states, but to suppression within local agrarian polities. To the latter one should add for the contemporary Indian context, and probably others as well, marginalization and suppression by practices of ruthless industrialization (Behera 2013; Padel 2008). In our understanding these amount to contemporary neo-colonial practices.

Barnard and Lee come close to describing the people we have in mind in this issue. Legal discourse in India often identifies them as members of "Scheduled Tribes" and "Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups". Over the course of the twentieth century some of these people themselves began to adopt a language of indigeneity in a narrow sense; they began to self-identify as *adivasi*, literally, "original inhabitants" (Carrin / Guzy 2012). The usage is not, however, universal. In the northeastern states, the term *adivasi* is, somewhat paradoxically, reserved for immigrant populations. Even when applied,

the notion of indigeneity is not uniform. Its functions within society vary, depending upon who is using the terminology and for what purposes (Berger 2014). Even allowing for these concessions, the peoples discussed here seem sufficiently distinct from their neighbours and sufficiently similar to one another socially, politically and economically to merit consideration in a single set of essays. "Indigeneity" provides a convenient and often used label with which to begin to identify them.

The term "religion"

Religion, too, is a much discussed and contested category. Scholars of religions have tried to define it in many different ways: substantively (in terms of specific content, such as belief in gods), functionally (in terms of what religion does, such as give meaning to life), "polythetically" (that is, in terms of a list of features, none of which is necessarily found in all religions), and prototypically (that is, in terms of instances that seem to be the "prototypes" of religion, the most common prototype being Christianity) (cf. Alles 2005). None of these strategies has proved entirely satisfactory, and in recent decades some critics have insisted that religion is a culturally and historically specific category inapplicable in much of the world, including India.

It is true that, as decades of research have established, the category of "religion" as we know it today emerged as a result of developments within post-Reformation Europe and was then, in conjunction with European colonization, exported to the rest of the world. Brent Nongbri's recent survey of these developments (Nongbri 2013) is noteworthy in this regard, not only because it is very accessible, but also because Nongbri's father himself is Khasi, that is, a member of an indigenous people in the Indian state of Meghalaya. It is also true that words used to translate "religion" into other languages are often at best loose approximations. A paradigmatic example is the well-known Indian term, *dharma*. At the same time, critics of the category "religion" often attribute to it a meaning that is overly specific. Thus, according to Nongbri, religion denotes "a kind of inner disposition and concern for salvation conceived in opposition to politics and other 'secular' areas of life (Nongbri 2013: 24)". He claims further that "[s]uch a view is so common that many people in the modern world would […] consider it self-evident (ibid.)".

From the essays that follow it should be apparent that the authors represented here do not consider it self-evident that religion is a private, inner disposition directed toward salvation; nor must the term have that meaning. "Religion" also commonly refers to the many ways, public and private, in which groups and individuals engage with deities, spirits and ancestors. As

Melford Spiro put it half a century ago, religion is "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings" (Spiro 1966: 96). Many would consider Spiro's formulation inadequate as a general definition of religion, but it can serve here as a "first stab" at what the following essays are about. As such, it is sufficient reason to bring them together, without creating a presumption that there is some "indigenous religion" with ubiquitously shared characteristics, whether in South Asia or throughout the world (Tafjord 2013).

Religion as cultural and ritual performances

In our broad understanding, religion is often manifested as cultural and ritual performances in largely public events. One useful tool for approaching these activities is the notion of "units of observation" developed by the anthropologist Milton Singer (1959, 1972). In his view, when applied to performances units of observation

> include what we in the West usually call by that name [i.e. performances] – for example, plays, concerts and lectures. But they include also prayers, ritual readings and recitations, rites and ceremonies, festivals and all those things we usually classify under religion and ritual (Singer 1972: 71).

Following Singer's lead, we focus primarily on rituals or religious acts within a common framework as "elementary constituents" of indigenous cultures and include "cultural media", i.e. audio-visual expressions, including music, dancing, possession, drawings, etc. (see Guzy in this volume). We take it as axiomatic that cultural performances are based on existing socio-cultural configurations, predispositions and repertoires, on traditions as vernacular practices and fields in which indigenous peoples and wider society interact. In and through cultural performances boundaries are drawn in accordance with demotic worldviews, alternative centres are established, counter-narratives created and hegemonic narratives resisted (see Lyngdoh in this volume).

Given the embeddedness of religion, cultural performances signify for us a need to focus primarily on rituals. In our understanding of this analytical and etic construct we broadly follow Tambiah (1985: 124), who argued:

> Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It consists of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition).

We suggest that the complexity of rituals, and power, should be approached on the one hand through a range of academic theories and on the other

through the application and understanding of the indigenous knowledge and value systems of the given society. Rituals are seen as performative texts which inscribe the values of a given society on the bodies of its members (Wulf / Zirfas 2004: 7–48). Rituals as crucial cultural practices can be empirically grasped by cultural sciences. As such, rituals and their dynamics can be read as expressions of local knowledge and value systems (Harth / Schenk 2004; Caduff / Pfaff-Czarnecka 2001: 127–148). As cultural practices rituals also refer to people's superior encompassing values and shape their cultural worldview (De Coppet 1992: 1–35). They orchestrate both the individual's and the collective's rhythms of life (see Alles and Skoda in this volume). In their periodically repetitive and, thus, complexity-reducing character they have socio-psychological effects on individually and collectively perceived experiences of crisis caused, for example, by the experience of death or collective disorder (see Guzy and Nadal in this volume). In the Durkheimian view, rituals are rhythms of social life expressed best in asceticism as a "negative cult" (Durkheim 1912) – prescribing what not to do and what to abstain from – as well as mediated by the "positive cult" defining what to give through diverse elements of sacrifice. Both ritual dynamics of restraint and donation shape a society's given social structure and value system. As Lévi-Strauss has pointed out, in their symbolic effectiveness rituals are socially and individually powerful. Moreover, rituals can also provoke a strong ritual critique, expressed in a symbolic distancing and rationalization of social reality. The effectiveness of rituals is a result of their symbolic paradoxes rather than any clear meanings: they operate precisely because of the belief in the effectiveness of ritual acting rather than through any reflection about the sense of this acting (Bonte / Izard 1991: 630–633). Claude Lévi-Strauss (1971) suggests studying the ritual in terms of the ritual itself as "l'art pour l'art"; in this way ritual performances can be also approached as artistic and aesthetic expressions. Thus, the ritual as a performative act is not only associated with the sacred sphere. It is also part of broader cultural creations which transmit culture-specific articulations of practices, words, personal experiences and art that we begin to explore in this volume.

(In)tangible religious heritage of indigenous people

With the adoption of the UNESCO convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage of 2003, which has since been ratified by more than 150 mostly non-European countries, India among them, the highest priority has been assigned to the collection and preservation of intangible cultural heritage. The concept has overcome the hegemony of the (sacred) script,

which long excluded or devalued techniques of knowledge transmission and knowledge systems not encoded in script. The absence of script has become a socio-cultural pattern in the sociological and ideological marginalization of indigenous societies and religions predominantly shaped by orality. This means that the local values and knowledge systems are enshrined in what is oral: speech, song, the act and ritual performance. The local knowledge systems and meanings can be understood as indigenous theories without any script. Indigenous theories signify local systems of meaning or understanding. A system of meaning is a subjective, culturally specific, locally designed and transmitted rationality (Weber 1980). Meaning systems create sense, not least by means of the senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. Knowledge is generated and transmitted through techniques of acoustic and visual, oral or literal representation (Guzy 2009: 102). Local or indigenous theories and knowledge systems consist of ideas and values that are sensually communicated. They use language in the form of ritual speech, the body as ritual embodiment (trance), music and dance. Mythological narratives, healing ceremonies, oracles or liturgies are clear manifestations of indigenous theories. Due to the hegemonic script-centred interest of pre- and post-Independence India, many of these indigenous theories of orality and oral theories were ignored; and those that were documented to represent the local heritage for international readers were often used in reinforcing the cultural disjunctions of colonial politics (Naithani 2010).

Indigenous India possesses a wealth of oral and performative forms of indigenous theories linked to “religion”. However, recent institutionalizations of previously fluid and unsystematized indigenous worldviews and beliefs can be observed in various religious re-vitalization movements such as Donyipolo and Rangfraism (see Scheid and Barkataki-Ruscheweyh in this volume). They lead to the production of increasingly tangible systematizations of ideas and values labelled as indigenous religion and expressed through inventions of a script (Carrin 2008: 24–37), bureaucratic structures (Guzy 2002) and visual imaginaries expressing contemporary institutionalization processes of formerly fluid and intangible categories and dynamics.

Environment and the sacred landscapes

Indigenous peoples in South Asia have often been identified through their particular relationship with their dwelling environment – they have for example been called *pahari* (hill dweller), *jangali* (forest dweller) and other vernacular terms. Such appellations reflect outsiders’ perspectives on them and sometimes convey pejorative, romanticizing, colonizing or patronizing

attitudes that emerge from the othering and exoticizing discourses of social marginalization and exclusion. The following characterization of these peoples in an anthropological survey of the indigenous peoples of Bangladesh stands in the tradition of the census in colonial India and illustrates views which once were dominant and are still common today:

> The major part of our tribal population inhabit the colourful and variegated forests of the district, whose primitive way of life, peculiar tribal organisation in society hardened by age-long customs, tradition, ritual and religious belief, separate ethnological entity and comparative impregnability of tractless hills and evergreen forests of the region [...]. The ripples of civilization into these hills have not yet penetrated beyond the surface. We, the inhabitants of the town and plainland have very little idea of this strange and new world peopled by these aboriginals (Sattar 1983: XII).

The notion of the strange dwelling environment, contrasting tradition with modernity, and the opposition between "urban civilization" and "tribal wilderness" have here been used to underline and reify the social boundaries between the social elite and high caste Hindus on the one hand and these "peoples of the forest" on the other. The colonial discourse of enlightenment and the evolutionary paradigm of cultural history as well as the neo-colonial paradigm of urban sedentariness have only contributed to the practice of segregation and marginalization.

Defining indigenous peoples through their habitation of natural environments is misleading, for it simply does not correspond to social reality. Many are ethnic communities of agricultural labourers or even farmers; others have settled in towns or found themselves in rapidly urbanizing settings or industrialized landscapes. They are very much peoples on the move in changing environments. However, it would also be misleading to claim that the natural environment is completely irrelevant to the discussion of the cultural identities of these peoples or that their close relationship with nature is a mere stereotype of Orientalism. Instead of postulating, however, the concept of the "exteriority of nature", which should be mentally processed and symbolically reflected, it would be more appropriate to think about "an active, perceptive and practical engagement with the components of the lived world" (Descola 2013: 65). Relationship with the environment becomes a lived experience, which charges the local landscape with memories, personal narratives and meanings. Places animate the ideas and feelings of people, and the same ideas and feelings animate the places (Basso 1996: 107). The shared tradition marks off some places as significant locations – both in geographical space and on the mental maps of mythological knowledge. Certain sites, such as mountains, groves, bodies of water and other places are set apart and sacralized, as they "are distinguished from arenas of everyday social

life by distinctive, value-laden forms of behaviour" (Anttonen 2013: 13). Such sacred places are often considered by the communities to be the arenas of mythical events of the past and are of great importance for their sense of belonging and identity (see Beggiora in this volume). These sites are also particularly vulnerable to aggressive transformations of the environment, such as deforestation, mining and industrialization (see Skoda in this volume). While the forced re-location of communities to new habitats is usually painful and can be damaging, the re-location of sacred sites and the related intangible cultural heritage localized in them is simply impossible. Ravaging these places can destroy the self-esteem, value system and very identity of indigenous communities (see Nadal in this volume) – or even lead to memocide (Samaddar 1998) or cultural genocide (Padel 2008).

"Deep ethnography"

The volume brings together contributions based on long-term anthropological and historical research which may be best characterized as "deep ethnography" (Pryor 2004; Block 2012). All authors have a lasting and deep-rooted engagement with their interlocutors and have immersed themselves in their respective fields with profound respect for other cultures.

More explicitly, for their primary fieldwork the authors used various qualitative, collaborative and dialogical ethnographic explorations and audio-visual documentations: participant observation, audio-visual recordings of rituals, the solicitation of stories, musical performances, instruction in various arts, and open-ended or semi-structured interviews with local, political or ritual interlocutors, actors or other participants in the respective area. In contrast, relatively more formal quantitative methods, such as carefully crafted surveys available for statistical analysis, have in the past been of doubtful value, particularly when working with indigenous people. Many of them have no formal education and as a result find even simple surveys either baffling or threatening. Those who can complete surveys constitute a formally educated elite and, thus, represent only a part of the community, and perhaps a very atypical part at that, at least for the time being. Therefore, this issue assembles contributions that strongly emphasize qualitative rather than quantitative methods. This does not, however, exclude the possibility of triangulation and contextualization with other sources.

This prolonged fieldwork conducted by doctoral, post-doctoral or senior researchers facilitated a subtle and nuanced rather than gross or shallow ethnography. Instead of a grab-and-run approach they have been committed to their respective fields for years – despite academic or bureaucratic hurdles

and funding problems. Thus, the intensity as well as extensiveness and insights acquired through such long-term engagement are clearly visible and stand out in times of increasingly shorter field “visits” and an inflationary use of the term that has practically turned ethnography into a buzzword. On the basis of deep ethnography, this volume focuses particularly on vernacular worldviews, ritual practices and innovative or creative negotiations and contestations of religious traditions that go beyond textual forms, all be they expressed in text in this special issue.

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