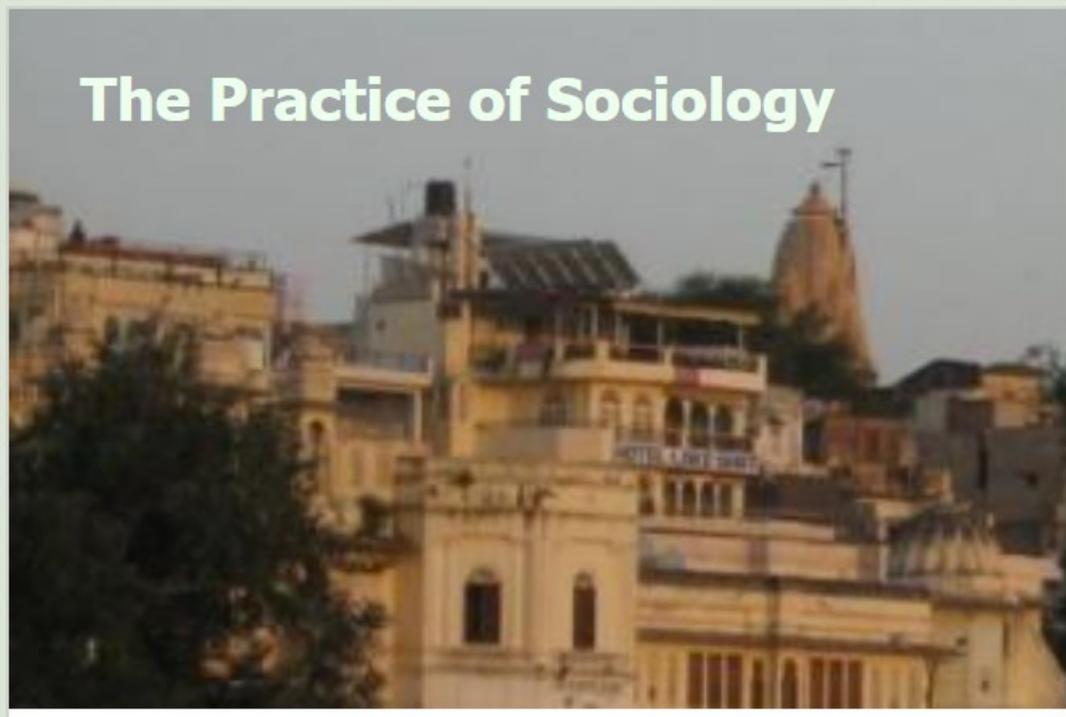


The Practice of Sociology



BOOK REVIEW: Religion and Secularities: Reconfiguring Islam in Contemporary India (Orient Blackswan)

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In Indian sociology, while a lot of research has been done on issues of caste, tribe, ethnicity and gender, very little attention has been paid to the sociology and anthropology of religion, especially Islam and Christianity. One of the reasons for this could be religion's uneasy relationship with the postcolonial Indian nationstate. Particularly, in the post-partition context, religion was viewed with suspicion— as a major factor of communal violence. Although the postcolonial Indian state did not refute the role of religion in public sphere, it adopted a secular model of nation-building that aimed to maintain equidistance from all religions. Following this, Indian sociology was preoccupied with questions of secular modernity rather than religion (Sahoo, 2019). However, recently some Indian sociologists have focused their attention on religion and the role it plays in public life. Sitharaman and Chakrabarti belong to this small group of sociologists who have contributed significantly in understanding the complex and dynamic relationship between religion and secularism in India. In their new edited volume *Religion and Secularities*, which grew out of a seminar at IIT Kanpur, Sitharaman and Chakrabarti examine the multiple facets of Islam in the diverse sociohistorical context of India.

The volume has a long and comprehensive introduction and seven chapters by a group of young researchers working on the sociology of religion. The introduction by Sitharaman and Chakrabarti sets the tone for the book, posing some vital questions related to the anthropology of Islam in India. Specifically, the introduction engages with four important and interrelated themes such as debates on 'Indian Islam', the trope of

syncretism, ethnography of the secular and Islamic public sphere in India. The essays in this volume are broadly organised around these themes. Under the first theme, the editors ask: 'What is the uniqueness of Indian Islam?' Discussing the works of Imtiaz Ahmad, Veena Das, Francis Robinson and others, the editors show how Indian sociologists and anthropologists have majorly 'focused on the questions of kinship, family and caste within Muslim communities' (p. 4). By highlighting some of these aspects, the above scholars have shown how Islam has intermingled with the local cultural and religious traditions, giving rise to syncretic practices. In this context, Sitharaman and Chakrabarti argue that while syncretism constitutes a vital aspect, it has limitations and there are several other ways of looking at Indian Islam. In the second theme, Sitharaman and Chakrabarti examine the limits to syncretism. Particularly, they question the liberal secular understanding that considers syncretism as liberating and as a solution to communalism and religious intolerance. For them, the liberal model lacks reference to processes or temporal manifestation and views syncretism only as a static condition (p. 8). In this section, the editors ask: 'Does syncretism truly offer inclusive possibilities for a merging of religious differences, or is it a code word for the incorporation and assimilation of "minority" cultures into the culture of the dominant group?' (p. 9–10). Addressing this, Aditya Kapoor in Chapter 1 discusses the 'fluidity of social boundaries and identities' (p. 32) and shows how Muslims negotiate their 'Muslim' and 'Bengali' identities in their everyday lives and how it is not about dominance of one identity over the other, but a strategic interplay of multiple identities. Moreover, Kapoor importantly illustrates that 'construction of religion as faith or as an ideology is a contextually embedded process with shifting boundaries' (p. 33).

Under the third theme, the book discusses the categories of the religious and the secular and their relationship with the modern nation state. While much of the literature has posited the sacred and the secular as two separate and opposite realms, the essays in this section reveal how both are 'closely intertwined in paradigmatic ways in modern nation states' (p. 12). By taking law as an example of the modern state's governance mechanism, the essays demonstrate the blurred boundaries between the sacred and the secular. While Aleena Sebastian's chapter discusses the interface of law and socio-cultural pluralities through a context specific historical analysis of matrilineal practices among Mappila Muslims of Malabar, Suchandra Ghosh and Anindita Chakrabarti's essay questions the incompatibility between the secular state law and the non-state religious laws through an ethnographic study of the dispute resolution processes among Muslim litigants in Kanpur. Moreover, Sudha Sitharaman also examines the relationship between religion, secularity and law and asks: Is secularism the best mechanism to govern religious diversity and reduce communal violence in India? Contrary to the liberals (as well as right-wingers) who upheld secularism as progressive, Sitharaman, through the case of the Bababudhan dargah controversy, shows that instead of reducing, 'modern secular governance' in India has in fact 'contributed to the exacerbation of religious tensions, hardening inter-faith boundaries and polarizing religious differences' (p. 87).

The rest three chapters of the book engage with the final theme, public sphere and civil society. By critically engaging with the Habermasian idea of 'public sphere' and Casanova's idea of 'public religions' the authors examine the possibilities of an Islamic 'counter public' that transcends the rational (secular) deliberations.

Notably, as T. Hashim in his chapter shows, multiple religious groups engaged with each other not only to establish an Islamic public sphere in Malabar but also to decide on the nature of 'true Islam'. What is unique in this is that these groups were 'influenced by their understandings of their text and everyday religious practices' as well as 'socio-political conditions' (p. 133). Similarly, Shahul Ameen K. T. shows how the Solidarity Youth Movement in Kerala has introduced an ethico-religious dimension to debates on public sphere and civil society. In the final chapter, R. Santhosh asks: Is Islam incompatible with secularism? Addressing this, Santhosh discusses the role of a Muslim reformist organization in the palliative care movement in Kerala and shows how the Islamic and secular ethos can coexist. Particularly, he discusses how the volunteers of the palliative care movement present their activism as Islamic dawa and at the same time are highly conscious of their secular ethos in the public domain.

The book makes several important contributions. First, in contrast to several studies, which call for consolidating secularism to strengthen democracy, this book shows how secularism can also polarise identities and exacerbate religious intolerance. Secondly, contrary to the literature that posits the religious and the secular as conflicting domains, this book provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the religious and the political and shows how the boundaries between the two could often be blurred. Finally, by discussing the various aspects of the everyday lived realities of Muslim communities in different socio-structural contexts, the book provides a holistic perspective on the anthropology of Islam in India. Two minor shortcomings of the book are: one the thematic distribution of the chapters is uneven, and two, I would have liked the inclusion of some chapters that discuss the questions of caste, kinship and family relations among Muslims in contemporary India. Despite these minor shortcomings, the volume is filled with new theoretical insights and makes a substantial contribution to the sociology and anthropology of religion in India.

Reference

Sahoo, S. (2019) Caste, conversion and care: Towards an anthropology of Christianity of India. *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, 32(Article 3), 9-19.

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