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CONTENTS

Editorial

This volume contains six articles, one report on an environmental movement in North Sikkim, and four book reviews. Of the four book reviews, the one by Dr. Prasenjit Biswas can actually be called a review article rather than a book review. The report on North Sikkim written in the form of a travelogue by a Lepcha postgraduate student of the university is worth appreciating because it not only brings out the different voices from within her community which is engaged in the movement but also distances itself from all of them to the extent it is humanly possible to do so for a young student.

Of the six articles included in this volume the first is by Prof. C. R. Agera, who teaches philosophy at NEHU. His discourse on culture and religion, on Clifford Geertz, and on what the narratives can do is something anthropologists would be much jealous about. But I am glad that two anthropologists, Prof. P. K. Misra and Angela Rangad, have very ably demonstrated in their article the power of narratives in the context of Khasi society. These two articles complement each other and I am glad that the two could be published together.

From the two complementary discourses the journal moves on to performance of public sector banks which are expected to play a new role in the era of globalization and liberalization. Jaynal Uddin Ahmed, the author, brings out certain dichotomies in this sector on the basis of his study in Barak Valley of Assam covering the three districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. In the next article, the journal moves to an issue that is important from the human rights point of view. Arun Kumar Singh, who teaches law at NEHU, deals in particular with the problems of protection of witnesses under criminal justice administration in India. He deals with various cases, constitutional provisions, special statutes like TADA and POTA in the country and compares the situation here with situations in Australia, United Kingdom and the United States of America.

The fifth and sixth articles are focussed on Meghalaya. The fifth article draws our attention to the unused potentials of tourism development in Meghalaya. The author Benjamin F. Lyngdoh also brings out the direct and indirect opportunities related to tourism sector and

the problems that this sector is facing now. In the sixth article two PhD students of Geography Department of NEHU, Shembhalang Kharmawlang and Saveyna Dkhar, bring out the legal position of various kinds of forests in West Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya and the impact of the ban on tree felling imposed by the Supreme Court of India on the people of the district.

I wish all our readers a very happy reading.

T B Subba
Editor

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Interface Between Religion and Culture: A Study through the Narratives

C. R. AGERA

Introduction

Unlike the nineteenth century philosophers like Kierkegaard and Kant, who, in their own irreconcilable ways, lay bare the interface between religion and morality, the twentieth century philosophers and social scientists are preoccupied with the interface between religion and culture, thanks to a great deal of anthropological studies carried out in recent times on both religion and culture. The interface between the two is far more complex, partly due to the intricate web of relations between them, and partly due to the prevalent conceptual haze surrounding the two terms. Both the concepts are inextricably woven with the other related concepts such as the narratives, pluralism, multiculturalism, secularism, cultural identity, nationalism, postmodernism and so on. I would like to discuss here the interface, focussing my attention on the role of the narratives within a given worldview encompassing religion and culture of a people. What is the relation that holds between religion and culture, when they are viewed from the perspective of the narratives, or stories, of the worldview of a people? My examples are drawn from across the religious cultures.

Concepts of Culture and Religion

Let us begin with the clarification of the concepts under study. We may begin with Geertz's definition of culture:

> [Culture is] an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.[1]

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A culture is a sum total of (patterns of) meanings, or inherited ideas, in symbolic forms, evolved in the course of the historical processes. In and through these meanings, or ideas, we communicate, perpetuate and develop our knowledge of, and attitude to, life in the community. Because cultures are formed in the historical processes, they continually change and develop in their environment, both natural and social, while retaining all along something of their original identity. They are patterns (as opposed to specificities) of meanings and conceptions embodied in symbols. Symbols themselves are signs that stand for invisible meanings that govern our understanding of and the attitude to life. A flag, an anthem, a march, a religious or political rite, a uniform, a billboard and a traffic signal are all symbols. Words that we speak and write too are symbols, linguistic in character. A culture therefore is a sum total of conceptions, or ideas. The utopia of an ideal society, the ideas of revolution, democracy, equity, freedom, responsibility and *nirvana* are all symbols of varied nature in our cultural life. The meanings of these conceptions are continually discussed. Although it is not often conceptualized with precision, nonetheless, it is palpably present in our view of things. The meanings of our symbols are an integral part of the stories we tell our children, the movies that we watch, the inspirations and exhortation that we give to one another, the hopes and aspirations that we share, the values that we commonly cherish, in short, of our whole worldview operative in our community life.

As a part of our worldview, the shared meanings and conceptions constitute the way in which we view and constitute reality. Because the meanings and conceptions have multiple dimensions, they are invariably expressed in *symbolic* forms, open to many possibilities. The symbols themselves may be words or things or institutions. There is a vagueness around them. Referring to their vagueness, Adorno observes them to be characterized by 'something of suspense'.[2] Plato had thought of justice in a similar vein: Justice is not what we perceive. It is rather an idea which, indeed, in order to retain its effectiveness as a norm or standard, cannot be an ethereal or floating idea (*Phaedo,* 10). The idea of justice finds its numerous forms in the court, our family and in our dealings with our fellow human beings, in our administration, polity and so on. The entire institution of jurisprudence is a symbol of justice (along with retribution). Wittgenstein in contemporary times thinks that culture is a whole way of life. It exists in the manner in which we want to live our life. Therefore whatever we say and do and whatever institutions that we establish in our midst are expressions of our

culture. Our language, customs, legal systems are all expressions of our culture, in as much as they express how we see and share our life. They constitute our knowledge of and attitude to life.

If we are compelled to mitigate the implicit suspense and vagueness, we could amplify our understanding of culture as a sum total of meanings, values and norms that we share in belief and practice in society. All our experience in society takes place in terms of them. Firstly, culture embodies meanings. Heidegger observes that our usual experience (*Erfahrung)* takes place in the world of meanings. Our world is not what is dispassionately observed but a life-world (*Lebenswelt*), in as much as we *live* with things (*Umwelt*) and other persons (*Mitwelt*). All things and persons, the moment they come on the map of our consciousness, become endowed with meanings (relevance) for us: a photograph revives memory and evokes emotions; a hammer is a tool for work; a person is a friend with whom I share many things. A photograph, a hammer and a person are not the objects of dispassionate perception but of meaningful interaction. The people we interact with, in particular, are not moving machines or talking bodies, but persons endowed with significant meaning to us.

Secondly, culture embodies values. Values are whatever we perceive as the good that is worthy of striving for; values are the goals that we pursue. Value is the exclusive concern of study for ethics and morality.[3] There are values and values: moral, social, economic, aesthetic and spiritual. Some values have intrinsic worth, they are ends in themselves; some have only an instrumental worth. Some values can therefore be ends, others only means to other ends. Some values are mere norms. Some are virtues to be practised. Preservation of nature, establishment of a just society, care and nurture of children, keeping promises, speaking the truth, enjoyment of nature, moderation in food and drink are all examples of values that we share in the common social life. Culture, the embodiment of meanings, values and norms, then necessarily has a common base in a shared community life. Values are therefore said to be rooted in a lived life. Things may have value in one respect, but not in another. This may often make for a conflict among values in practice. Naturally, people would be expected to choose judiciously between values, when conflicts do arise with due regard to their specific circumstances. The conflict of values and the judicious choice of one value against another are everyday experiences of people. Moral values form a class by themselves. Values are in the centre of societal, or shared life; without values there cannot be a society at all.

Thirdly, culture embodies norms. Norms, derived from the Greek *nomos,* are moral rules, laws and customs. They have their origin in moral values. Most norms are only negatively expressed, although sometimes they are also positively formulated. If they are negatively expressed, they are proscriptions, e.g., "Thou shalt not kill". When they are positively expressed, they are prescriptions, e.g. "Love thy neighbour" (*Luke*, 10:17).

Culture exists only in meanings, values and norms. In other words, every culture has its basis in some meanings, values and norms, which develop in the course of history and get subsequently internalized in the life of the people. In this sense culture is historically handed down to the members of the society to congeal into a *tradition*. Thus every society has a cultural tradition. The core of a tradition is formed by the institutions of family, a system of education for inculturation, religion and polity.[4] The specific form of these institutions may change from time to time but, as traditional institutions, they continue to retain their identity and thus to form the nucleus of the cultural tradition. Thus we see a culture grow into a tradition, maintaining a close link between culture and tradition. Let us exemplify the idea. A virtue like honesty is a value. It is learned by a child as he grows up and gets educated through the formative and educative institutions of family and school. Likewise the child further learns to make the right choice, to judiciously resolve a conflict of values, should there be one, say, between honesty and truthfulness, in the course of its upbringing. It learns the proscriptions and prescriptions in the larger society through the many social, political and religious institutions. It is not a question of merely organizing the meanings, values and norms, but of internalizing them in one's life. Religion that forms a part of culture has a special role in the process of internalization of the ideas and the ideals that are needed as much for stability of social life as for transcending the same life. Religion then straddles between the empirical and the transcendental, interpersonal and transpersonal life. This calls for a deeper analysis of religion, before we can take up the issue of its relation to culture.

Geertz's definition of religion may be cited:

> "...a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in man by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."[5]

Religion too is 'a system of symbols', even as culture is 'a pattern of meanings embodied in symbols'. Religion too formulates 'conceptions of a general order of existence', even as culture is 'a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms'. Both culture and religion, then, are apparently systems of symbols, embodying meanings and conceptions whereby man lives his life. Therefore they are closely intertwined. Culture includes a religion as an institution within it, even as religion formulates meanings and conceptions needed for the culture. Perhaps we could say that, while religion provides the culture its content, culture provides religion a distinctive form. Both serve traditions in so far as they are handed down historically from one generation to another. Thus it becomes meaningful to speak of not only religious culture but also the cultural form of religion.

Geertz's otherwise significant definition of religion suffers from a serious shortcoming in that it has no reference to the element of transcendence. The shortcoming is common to most social scientists, if not all.[6] Scholars of religion and philosophy, on the contrary, identify transcendence as the core of religion. But it may be contended that the social scientists, generally speaking, presuppose that religion has an intentionality to transcendence in one form or another. Likewise that religion is a way of salvation that forms its spirituality. Every religion has its own spirituality without which its salvific value in human life would not be entertained at all. The function of religion is to open up man's life to transcendence and ensure a wholesome (salvific) way of life here and hereafter. In this function it transforms man, uplifting him at once from the confines of his narrow self, family, ethnic group and nation, in short, from his natural proclivities to selfishness. Thus religion is both intensely personal and equally transpersonal and trans-social. Its social function however is more important to my present context.

In its social function, religion is used as the instrument and ideology to unify people under narrow identities, including national identities. In these narrow identities, religion is often used to justify wars, to proclaim superiority of one group against another. Both the religious orientations, vertical and horizontal, the transcendental and social, are, we may note, attempts at reading meaning into human existence, of 'formulating conceptions of a general order of existence'. The greatest task of religion, speaking culturally, is to make human existence meaningful. Even those who are hostile to organized religion, invent, for the sake of deriving meaning for human existence, quasi- religions in secular ideologies, nationalist movements, even such commercial ventures as film and advertising.

Religion formulates a general order of existence and reads meaning into it. In doing this it evokes powerful and pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in our cognitive, affective and conative life. Religion is a powerful force in human life. It easily becomes, like culture, a pervasive tradition. Religious traditions are transmitted through the upbringing of children. If we are motivated to care for one another, it is because we have learned the value of altruism sustained by religious sentiments. Likewise our motivation to be truthful, righteous and honest is rooted in our religious upbringing. Truth, righteousness and honesty are viewed as the values representing an aspect of transcendence of human life as lived in the society, in which we are born and brought up. To begin with, parents impart these values to us in the family. Subsequently the values get reinforced in the schools and the larger society. We learn further creatively the practice of honesty in the new situations either to be proactively honest or silently so. Similarly, we creatively learn when to claim our rights and when to submit. In other words, we learn how to live meaningfully in the course of things. We learn to discern priorities and to choose wisely.

Sociologists call this process of internalizing the meanings, values and norms as inculturation. We are incultured through the upbringing and education, both formal and informal. We learn to live in a manner that suits our circumstances and wins the approval of the members of the cultural group to which we belong. Such cumulative traditions as ethnicity, nation, language and religion continually inculturate their members. Whole societies take part in the process of inculturation. In the older, often the closed, societies, religion played an important role in the process of inculturation. In modern societies however there are several traditions, ending the monopoly of religious traditions, which influence the process: family, nation, language, markets, media and a host of subcultures. Nonetheless, religion continues to play a pivotal role in the transmitting of meanings, conceptions, customs, laws, insights and norms. Even speaking of religion, there could be more religious traditions than one in one's pluriform societies today. Modern societies are known to encounter an interface of many influences in their making.

Religion is powerful and pervasive in that it evinces long-lasting moods and motivations for our cognition, emotion and action. It carries out its functions through its belief systems, rituals, festivals, almanacs, sermons and discourses, celebration of *rite de passage,* scriptural narratives and so on. Its narratives, in particular, are continually read and re-read and commented upon in the family and common places of worship and celebrations. The

narratives read meaning into the general order of human existence, and imprint on human life its values, and thus strongly motivate human beings to specific actions, or a particular way of life. This may need some explanation.

Manifestly the functions of culture and religion are overlapping. Nonetheless, culture is preserved and perpetuated through the religious traditions. Yet it is important for us to note that neither the cultural nor the religious conceptions of reality form a total system. This is largely because we live with partial insights, fallible knowledge, limited wisdom and open worldviews and pluriform values, often in conflict with one another. Indeed, there is a sense in which cultural and religious traditions, far from being total systems, are only what instruct us how to live with all the paradoxes and inconsistencies of life. Religious beliefs, rites, discourses, hymns, prayers, recitations of scriptures, festivals and so on are all means to help us live in a complex world. Likewise cultures too are not whole systems. Modern cultures, in particular, are no longer homogeneous. They are replete with contradictions and paradoxes; nonetheless, they help us to negotiate meaningfully with the complex world. Conflict between economic growth and conservation of nature, prioritizing between social life and hard work, mature judgment about claiming one's rights or submission to other's wishes are all obvious features of the complex modern culture. Culture makes use of religion, because the latter, by way of relating one's life to transpersonal transcendence, or God, eminently helps one to overcome the conflicts insightfully and responsibly. Profound insights of both culture and religion, while being fully utilized, may not however be necessarily expressed in the clearest propositions that a philosopher would have wished. But they are expressed in metaphors, similes and stories that weave a complex pattern of meanings, embodied in variegated symbols, at once making for a great deal of hermeneutical space. Hence the importance accorded to the narratives in laying bare the interface between culture and religion.

Unlike a cultural tradition, a religious tradition is characterized by a spirituality within it. In virtue of the latter religion is capable of fostering the long-lasting moods and motivations, and thus make one experience the meanings attached to persons and things. The spirituality of a religious tradition has both a mystical and empirical dimensions. In its mystical side it is related to the experience of transcendence by way of prayer and meditation. In its empirical side however it is related to the experience of all things and persons that we encounter. On account of the dual dimensions of the spirituality

of religious traditions, religion is extraordinarily powerful and pervasive in stabilizing the social and personal life.

In sum, culture lives in meanings, values and norms. Religion, as a powerful tradition, teaches these meanings, values and norms to us. Hence culture needs religion to transmit its components to us. With their transmission these components are internalized in us: we are incultured. Indeed, the religious and secular traditions intermingle in our life into an inextricable whole so much so that we move freely between the cultural and the religious worlds. Religio-cultural values are internalized by means of a host of institutions, chief among them being the narratives.

Narrative, Culture and Religion

Narratives interpret human existence for us, relating it to the totality of reality. The interpretation helps us to negotiate with the ambiguities of life. It also materializes or concretizes the abstract values, the vague ideas and conceptions symbolically embodied in culture and religion, applying them to the differing contexts and situations of life. The narratives provide us with the images of good life and reality as it should be, often vastly different from the usual experience of life. Finally, the narratives, in being told and retold, often get woven with the fabric of other cultural stories from other cultural resources as history, economics, politics and so on quite ingeniously and imaginatively. I would now like to bring out the interface between culture and religion in explicating the above functions of the narratives.

1. *Narratives Interpret Human Existence*

There are regular points of contact between religious traditions and human existence. They are readily recognized because religion has its basis on such opposite characteristics as finitude and infinitude, failure and success, joy and suffering, happiness and misery, goodness and evil, wisdom and folly etc. Human existence is mysterious in that it is a unity of contrasting features. Failure to acknowledge this mysterious unity has driven philosophers like Hobbes and Rousseau to irreconcilable theories of human nature. It is our common experience that without these characteristics there is no human existence at all. The mysterious human existence stands in need of interpretation. It is interpreted, often quite differently by different religious traditions at different times, as is amply evidenced by cross-cultural studies of the narratives of world religions. The interpretations not merely differ, but may often contradict one another. Nevertheless, there may be overlapping simi-

larities as well. What is more, they are given in the context of situating human existence against the wider canvas of total reality.

Every religious narrative takes into account the fact of human life being characterized by finitude; human life is a mortal life in a world too great for a weak man. The narrative teaches man to accept his finitude, indeed, its acceptance is a prerequisite for human responsibility, care and concern. Existentialist philosophers have dealt on the finitude of man extensively. Some religions interpret death as the final seal ending the life. We are given one life, and it is this life; it has to be lived with responsibility. Some religions however think that the present life is a single joint in a series of lives in a cyclic reincarnate existence. But most religions however believe that the present life is a temporary sojourn, a portal for an eternal life, which ultimately transcends the human finitude. The infinitude that man is said to acquire in eternal life is seen either as a self-realization of one's own nature or as a new glory bestowed by the divine grace. All these interpretations are generally placed against the majesty of a supreme power to which the universe is said to owe its existence.

The universe itself with all that it contains, including man, is viewed as a creation. It owes its origin to a supreme being. What is more, whatever is created is supposedly good and glorious. Indeed, creation is wondrous, inspiring a feeling of awe and devotion to the creator on the part of man. Man is finite, contingent and too small, nevertheless, has a privileged, but responsible, place in creation. Creation is not to be seen as self-generated, but a product of divine intention and intervention. Man is the custodian of the good and glorious creation. Many religious narratives give a distinctive place in nature to man. Man is viewed as a superior form of existence in comparison with all other forms, living and non-living. Some religious traditions however may not drive a radical wedge between the human and the non-human existences, in as much as they view all creation as intricately woven existence of mutual interdependence. Even these traditions do not fail to allude to the special responsibility that man has to the whole creation.

The narratives suggest that there is a special relation between the creator, or supreme being, and human being. The supreme being is the sovereign, the majestic master, the human being however is small and contingent. Yet, man is much closer to the supreme being than to any other beings, in as much as he is endowed with the image of god, i.e., reason and freedom. In some religions the supreme being and man are, in the final

analysis, identical. The apparent difference is only due to the beginningless and mysterious 'ignorance' or 'forgetfulness'. A special point of contact is the vulnerability and the helplessness of human existence. Human existence gets mysteriously vitiated by the introduction of sin and evil, and man is somehow responsible for the fall of human nature. But man has his help from God. The pervasiveness of evil in creation, in particular, in man, is as much real as the divine grace. All this interpretation by the narrative negotiates with the conflicting features of human existence.

The narratives continually interpret human existence, read meaning into the typical characteristics of human nature. This is a genuine need of our life. For we cannot live without taking into account our finitude, responsibility, contingency, relatedness to others, freedom and individuality. Religious traditions teach us who we are, in diverse ways, often complementary, but more often, contradictory. Through them we internalize a host of beliefs, which directly govern our actions. Through them we learn to experience ourselves, other persons and nature as a whole. This experience we hand down from one generation to another as a true religious tradition.

A religious interpretation of human existence, it may be noted, places human beings within the broadest ambience of human origin and destiny. Man is now placed in the context of his creation and eschaton. Man is at once related to the ultimate being, God, Brahman, *Nirvana* and so on both as his origin and goal. Human beings are seen as creatures, or sparks of the divine, or created souls, or identical with the supreme soul and so on. Man's origin and destiny are said to be in divine hands (*Gita* 2:12). Religion therefore teaches man the true nature of reality. If man does not live in conformity with the true nature of reality, he is said to be alienated. His welfare rests with the reorientation of his life to the true nature of reality.[6] His salvation rests in moving from the self-centredness to reality-centredness.[7] Thus religions deal with both man's alienation and salvation.

The interpretation of reality, to be sure, is effected through a host of religious institutions, but the narratives play a dominant role in virtue of their ideal content. The narratives obviously take possession of man's belief systems and profoundly influence the action systems, too. They throw light on the human origins and destiny, the ground of human existence, the crisis and the reconciliation between the sacred and secular, between culture (society) and nature. Narratives are 'myths' (stories) in the literal sense, and are open to multiple meanings. Every culture has religious and non-religious

myths, and they negotiate for us with the multiple aspects of reality. None has highlighted this function of religious myths in recent times more than Ricoeur. Ricoeur believes that religious myths have a bearing on our origins, eschaton, evil, sin, alienation, salvation and so on. The western philosophical and theological traditions are acutely aware of the multiple meanings of the narratives. Spinoza seeks solutions to life's multiple aspects through the religious narrative, like Bible, in the search for the universals. However, the rationalist that he is, he considers truth to be universal.[8] He is perhaps inspired by Descartes' indubitable rational principles. Modernism advocated the same rational truths in its retreat from the specific and particular truths. Postmodernists today, on the contrary, reject this approach on the assumption that the modernist conception of truth is born out of a reductionistic rationality. But a move towards universality and rationality is for avoiding the conflicts of religious diversity. But the modernists and the postmodernists alike realize the function of the myths, universal or local. The only drawback, however, of the modernist reductionistic rationality is perhaps the neglect of the multivalent functions of what they consider to be the 'grand' or 'meta' narratives.

Existence of evil, which is a pervasive phenomenon in human nature, may be attributed by the narratives differently to human hubris, inordinate greed for material wealth, uncontrolled yielding to passions, ignorance and forgetfulness of one's true nature. This only accentuates the multiple interpretations of evil in human existence, both at the individual and social level. Philosophically the root of all evil is in the self-sufficiency of existence, in other words, in the attributing of ultimacy to all that is relative. Thus there are many strains of human estrangement, as conceived by, and accessible to, the narratives. Estrangement has many forms, and the narratives explicate them in many a description of events. Life's complexities are too many and too evasive to be conveyed unequivocally. At times more than one religious tradition may explain an aspect of life quite differently through the same narrative. At times different narratives of many religious traditions may converge on an aspect of life with the same meaning. Thus themes like sacrifice, self-victory, unselfishness and virtue in the midst of temptations can be shared across the overlapping traditions. The function of the narrative is not so much to provide a coherent metaphysical theory as to relate the various aspects of the mundane human existence to the transcendent, apprehended by a religious tradition. For example, a myth of eschaton in the narrative tells us how to persevere in the midst of travails and tribulations. A

myth may answer a question but, in the process, may give rise to yet other questions. Life is so elusive that reality needs to be related to transcendence in more ways than one in order to make a coherent sense of it.

2. *Negotiation with the Ambiguities of Life*

Life is ambiguous. Narratives help us to live with life's ambiguities. Human beings are perceived both as immortal and fragile. They are said to be created as 'a little less than the angels', yet, also as 'dust and ashes'. Pascal philosophically analysed human nature as being both debased and divine. Man experiences himself at times as small and insignificant, but at times as endowed with a rare dignity. Hobbes and Rousseau held diametrically opposite views that man in nature is evil or good respectively by their empirical observations. For man is capable of the greatest act of cruelty or self-sacrifice. Narratives interpret our ambiguous feelings, bringing them out into the open, while assuring us all along that this is the way life is. Both human frailty and dignity will have to be taken into account in the paradox of life. What is more, most narratives draw our attention to the ambiguity in creation itself. Creation itself is pitted against the void or formlessness (the Hindu *asat*, the Hebrew *tohu bohu*). Narratives have such rich possibilities for the mysterious that a mere analysis, either linguistic or literary, is likely to miss them. But the narratives are at their best and the deepest, when it comes to human experiences of reality as it is. The narratives fully cater to this given diversity of human experience of reality, in that they prepare us to live out the diversity meaningfully. Without these narratives neither philosophy nor theology can be what it is. Indeed, philosophy and theology presuppose the narratives. They may somewhat attempt the ordering of the narrative's thoughts, but it is immediately acknowledged that, in their ordering, the narratives are likely to lose their vital paradoxes and ambiguities and, to that extent, to become misfit to negotiate with the diverse experiences of life.

The paradoxes of the narratives apply not only to the human experiences of the mundane but also of the divine. The omniscient God does not seem to know everything. The omnipotent God apparently has no power over evil. The divine providence does not seem to be providing for the future. Yet, these paradoxical ideas are much closer to human reality than the seemingly clear and distinct philosophical ideas of omniscience, omnipo-

tence and providence. The narratives touch on not only the universal truths, but also the particularities to negotiate with the ambiguities of human existence. Therefore the statements about God in the narratives, in the end, really turn out to be statements about human existence itself. Thus the narratives exemplify the complex character of human predicament with its ambivalent intellection, volition, emotions, feelings and the conflicting, if also competing, obligations. Social and familial feud, treachery, perfidy, jealousy, uprising against authority are all depicted in their stark nakedness, as they take place in the everyday life of the community and the individual with agonizing pathos. Feelings, passions, loyalties, betrayals, responsibilities and negligences are all vividly depicted; indeed, they are the shared universals of human existence.

In a relatively homogenous cultural community, the more so in a community of believers, there is a certain 'hermeneutical competence', or the ability to apply the narrative, or a story with a specific content, to a contemporary historical situation, therefore, to one's own life, today. Gadamer uses the term 'fusion of horizons' to the outcome of the process of application and transference of the historical meanings of the narrative texts to the contemporary contexts.[9] One way of understanding the phrase is to suggest that the world of the contemporary reader fuses with the world of the narrative text that is being read now. But, perhaps, a better way of understanding the phrase would be that, with the help of a largely implicit and informal hermeneutical 'method', the message of the text with its own particularities is used to illumine and clarify one's own present life with all its struggles, hopes, despairs, victories, defeats, elations and despondencies. The net result is the feeling of being at home with others, who are more often than usual seen as different from us. This is Gadamer's understanding of the nature of understanding as dialogical. The alterity is newly discovered both as like us and different from us. The stories with the cultural and religious meanings have, to be sure, primary reference to past characters and situations, but they also encompass life as such with all its possibilities and actualities, conflicts of loyalties and betrayals, and also of gratitudes and ingratitudes, and so on. Scholars are wont to refer to these stories as *paradigms,* or examples to live by. Some scholars have also referred to them as the ways of *imagination*[10] by which we perceive ourselves in the world around us. They are paradigms of both how to live and how not to live. Some stories are for edification, a great many however are on tragedies, misunderstandings, unfaithfulness, insincerity and even downright foolishness.[11]

3. *Materialization of Abstract Ideas*

Narratives interpret and materialize abstract ideals. They are the intermediaries between the abstract paradigms, or imagination, and the concrete norms; they effect the concrete application of abstract and vague ideals to specific contexts, e.g., the parable of the Good Samaritan.[12] Love of God (*agape)* and love of neighbour (*caritas)*, as enunciated ideals of Christianity, and the universal compassion (*karuna*), as enunciated by Buddhism, may present themselves as the categorical imperatives. They are radical and universal ethico-religious principles. But how do we apply the principles in life in concrete situations? We can give a weak definition of 'neighbour' (ethnic, national, linguistic, religious and so on), to open up the principle to a host of interpretations. But the narrative comes up with an answer in the form of a story, to mitigate, or silence, as it were, the abstract and theoretical principle. The story leads to a disclosure.[13] Beyond the ideas of justice as fairness, the Kantian categorical imperative and also all types of casuistry, the parable speaks of a victim, a priest, a levite and a Samaritan, and of their specific attitudes and actions towards the one in need of care and concern in a particular situation. The point of view of the victim will disclose who a neighbour is. Such again is the disclosure effected by a *Jataka* story. Across the borders that separate human beings, the story teaches the value of compassion. The Gospel and the *Jataka* stories are a hermeneutical paradigm that mediates between the abstract and the concrete, the principle and action, the universal and the particular.

4. *Images of good Life*

The narrative provides us with the images of what a good life ought to be. It opens us to the dichotomy between fact and value, 'is' and 'ought', by providing us with a background for the practice of moral values. The moral realm is extremely complex with multiple choices and, yet, not without it being projected against a hierarchy of values. Hence, morality too may undergo developmental changes in new circumstances with new insights into the reality of life. Weakness of some and the power of others are treated together in terms of mutual support and sharing. Before the narratives the universal and deontological ethics may become ineffective. For an attitude of long-lasting mood may introduce a spirit of sharing between people who perform and fail to deliver, contrary to the common sense ideal of justice. Thus people may develop a hermeneutical competence to recognize a new moral value of sharing through the mirror of the narrative story.

In creating the new moral values and thus formulating the concept of good life and the vision of reality as it ought to be, the narratives very often go to the extent of projecting the counterfactual. For example, equality of man, when advocated as a new moral value, is a message for mankind, not a fact of life. The varied differences among people are a matter of fact that finds its expression in equally varied stratifications. Some ethnic cultures are so exclusive that others are not even acknowledged as fellow human beings. But the plain fact of human existence is that we as human beings live together, but the forms of relationship may differ widely, often determined by historical cultures. But cultures exist in many movements with a shared basis; without a shared commonality cultures can neither exist nor sustain themselves. A critique of our shared life takes place continually, at times, more radically, when the time is ripe for it. Classical religions originated by way of a critique of the society and culture of their times. They distinguish between a good life and a bad life, and offer a choice between the two. The prophets and the seers of religions give a continual call to choose the way of good life in opposition to the bad life of their times. All higher religious values, like love (*agape, caritas)*, compassion (*karuna)*, naturalness (*jinen*), non-violence (*ahimsa),* equanimity *(sthitaprajna),* are often preached against the prevailing morality of the world of the times, in virtue of the element of transcendence implicit in all religions. Therefore, religious narratives shape a counter-world, too, by way of an alternate imagination against the imaginations of 'this world', or a new disclosure.

5. *Creative Fusion of Religious and Cultural Narratives*

Finally, by virtue of the inextricable bond between culture and religion, their respective stories too unconsciously fuse into one another. Primary stories of religious traditions intermingle with the non-religious stories of other origins. For example, the Buddhist eightfold path (*asthangamarga*) gets fused with the numerous conversations of Buddha (*buddhavacana)*, the *koans* of the Zen masters, stories of the *Jatakas* and so on. The Christian story of the Good Samaritan gets infused with the mercy and medical mission of Florence Nightingale or Mother Theresa or Red Cross Society. The *Talmud* is a reservoir of applications of rules, including the failures of virtue, in totally different situations. Such is also the case of the life of the mystic Shem Tov of Hasidism. The reverse transformation of the religious stories into cultural stories, too, is not rare. Thus, we can speak today of western Christian culture without Christian religion. Thus, narratives, in a long tradition, are both items of jurisprudence and the hermeneutical paradigm. If one goes to

combine them with rituals, as is often the case, they form a full-fledged tradition that negotiates with the new situations of human existence. Stories of resistance to evil in the religious traditions can easily intermingle with those of the resistance movements in contemporary history, as is the case with Tilak's nationalistic movement for independence, Martin Luther King's movement for equal civil rights for the Afro-Americans in the USA and so on. There can be an imperceptible comingling of national history and religious history with the undertones of such values as freedom, equality, justice etc. The *Gita*'s doctrine in India was reinterpreted by some nationalists to fight the British regime, and thus to reinforce a nationalism. There can be an ideological reinterpretation of reality itself. The history that is retold is a selectively reconstructed story to inspire us in a world that is too big for us to handle. The link between culture and religion, and often between these two and nation is extremely close.

Hence, narratives, real or fictional, form a complex web, that, while dynamically keep changing, relate us to transcendence of human life and the concrete human existence. Through their mediation we open ourselves to transcendence of reality as it truly is, and to our common human existence with all its situations that are continually interpreted and reinterpreted to read meaning into our daily actions. The stories of the narratives are internalized as part of our cultural and religious heritage, thus at once becoming a paradigm of human existence and action. They illumine our cognitions, emotions and actions to direct our life as it should be. The corpus of the narratives leaves us ample 'hermeneutical space', in as much as the stories from other sources, traditions, worldviews and national histories are continually selected and incorporated. The stories influence people's lives profoundly, and they become an integral part of the culture they live in. Through the mediation of the stories, we acquire the basic insights into values that underlie human existence and action. As we tell the stories, we select and reconstruct the values, norms and rules that illumine the human situations of courage and cowardice, openness and hypocrisy, prescriptions and proscriptions. The blending of traditions, the religious and the cultural, takes place continually, and the religious and cultural traditions get inculturated in our life, at times even effecting a syncretism. The exposure to stories of other narratives is a current reality through schools, media, living together in heterogeneous close neighbourhood. Images and metaphors of the narrative stories extend even to the 'civil religions' of national culture. The story of the Buddha, the Good Samaritan is prevalent in every culture, often free from its

original context. These are stories that can happen anywhere anywhen in any form, because they have a universal appeal to human existence. Religious traditions particularly serve as resources to long-lasting moods and motivations. But they can be misused. One can flirt with them without serious engagement. One should make use of them without creating the lethal toxicity that the religious traditions often can release. This however is not the concern of the present essay.

Notes and references

1. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture,* Harper & Collins, 1973, p. 89. Such social scientists as Emile Durkheim (*Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* London: George Allen & Unwin, 1915) and E.B.Tylor (*Primitive Culture: Researches into the Philosophy, Religion, Art and Culture,* New York: Gordon Press, 1912), despite their reductionism, do not dismiss the element of transcendence or the 'sacred' or 'holy' as constituting the basic category of religion.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 113.
3. Paul Ricoeur thinks that the central concern of ethics is 'the good', while, of morality, the obligation of the good on our life. He accords primacy to the former. See his *Oneself as Another*, Trans. Kathleen Blamey, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
4. Shils E., *Tradition*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981.
5. Clifford Geertz, *op. cit.,* p. 90.
6. Hendrik M. Vroom, *Religions and the Truth,* Trans. J. Rebel, Grand Rapids: B. Eerdmans Publishing Ltd., 1989, *passim.* See his "Religious Hermeneutics, Culture and Narratives", in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue,* 4:2, 1994. I am indebted to the many ideas of Vroom in this article.
7. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989.
8. Spinoza, Book, VII, 176.
9. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* London: Sheed and Ward, 1979.

10. Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and Religious Imagination,* San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989.

11. *Matthew,* 25:1-13.

12. *Luke,* 10:25-37.

13. Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language,* London: SCM Press, 1951.

Book Reviews

Durba Ghosh and Dane Kennedy(eds), *Decentring Empire: Britain, India and the Transcolonial World*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2006.

The British Empire administratively withdrew from Southasia in 1947 and that marked the beginning of shrinking of the colonial rule from all over the world. The empire left a lot of its old baggage behind in its former colonies, invariably in ways of services, institutions, and associations, which continue to be relevant to the ex-colonies like India. With a view to dissecting and uncovering the mute dimensions of the empire, a conference was held in April, 2003 at the University of California, Berkeley in honour of Thomas Metcalf, a historian of the British Empire and South Asia. The above anthology of over a dozen presentations made in the conference informs the readers on the current debates among the historians of the empire. First of all, the book under review demonstrates that there were abiding connections between the histories of the empire such as the British and the process of globalization in the 18th century. Secondly, modernity and its various dimensions were equally attractive to the colonizers and the colonized. Thirdly, the volume demonstrates that "the British Empire as a superstructure was sustained and contested by the cultures of the empire". Finally, the presentations in the collection argue that the forces and practices unleashed by the colonial rule were never entirely in the control of the colonial authorities. It goes without saying that the British rule was an important factor in generating forces of modernity, which have also used the colonized subjects in their favour.

No doubt, India looms large in the volume, but the presentations in the volume demonstrate how uneven were its effects and how the Empire was plagued by inefficiency, confusion, contradiction and challenges. It was noted that the Suez trauma in 1956 marked the effective end of Britain as a super power. From these emerged in Britain a historiography of empire, shaped by mixed feelings of loss, nostalgia and regret verging on anger at its displacement by the United States of America. John Richards demonstrates how colonial rules were bent upon creating a usable revenue surplus each year with a view to investment and paying dividend to the Company's shareholders. In the process, there was a negligible revenue left for education, health,

David R. Syiemlieh, Anuradha Dutta and Srinath Baruah (eds), *Challenges of Development in North-East India*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2006, xii + 508, Rs. 1150 (US$75)

Challenges of Development in North-East India is the updated version of 23 well-researched papers by eminent writers. The origin of the papers goes back to a seminar organized by the Indian Council of Social Science Research – North-East Regional Centre (ICSSR-NERC) in October 2003. The new publication contains precious material on a wide range of subjects connected with development in North-East India. The papers are grouped under Polity (2 papers), Society (4), Economy (9), Tourism (3), Education (3) and Health (2 papers).

The inaugural address by the then Governor of Meghalaya, His Excellency Dr. M.M. Jacob provides an excellent overview of the challenges of development in the Northeast. Being in the periphery of India, observes Jacob, the development too is peripheral. He proposes practical solutions for the region's greater progress, and suggests better trade relations with countries that surround the region.

In the section on polity, Udayon Misra arguing forcefully for the economic development of the region, highlights the decades-long indifference of the Centre to the region's economic potential which resulted in a vicious circle of insurgency and underdevelopment. Added to this is also insufficient devolution of power. The "economics of 'colonial' exploitation" and the politics of alienation made the vicious circle still more vicious. By and large this was the situation till 1976. A change in the Centre's policy is noticed after this year. More devolution of power to the Northeastern states started from 1970s due to greater awareness of the fact that the challenges to development in the Northeast are inseparably linked to issues related to ethnicity, autonomy and territoriality. True development calls for the abandonment of "exclusionist stances" and acceptance of mutual interdependence and cooperation among the states. This will ensure speedy development.

"Government, Local Self-Government and the Role of the Civil Society" is the paper by Anuradha Dutta. In this well informed write-up the author by means of a long "introduction" (18 pages) explains the different aspects and workings of a democratic set-up. "Democracy and good governance are loyal allies", affirms Dutta. But good governance, warns the author, would depend on both formal and informal participation by people at the grassroots level, and effective roles by NGOs. Thinking globally and acting

locally would be effective only when good thinking takes place at the local level, and both men and women are given equal opportunities.

Under the section 'Society' dedicated mostly to "migrants and migration," Samir Kumar analyses the concept of "rights," and affirms that development cannot any longer be viewed independently of the question of rights. Runumi D. Baruah in his turn does a detailed study of migration patterns in Assam and offers a practical conclusion. "...Rural development," he writes, "coupled with measures to promote the growth of small and intermediate urban centres should be the core of any well meaning policy aimed at population distribution." A.C. Sinha in his "Marwari Collaborators and Nepali Subalterns: Two integrative social forces in North-East India" analyses the integrative elements in the Marwari and Nepali communities of the region. Sajal Nag considers the phenomenon of "migrants" an enduring, live issue of the region, and a major source of tension in all Northeastern states. The paper offers a detailed study of it especially from the aspects of displacement, right to land, influx of Muslim population, political power and anti-national feelings and accompanying spurt of violence. The paper is more a statement of facts than a strategy proposal.

The section under economy has the maximum number of papers. A.K. Agarwal focusses on the flow of Central funds to the Northeast. In spite of the availability of huge sums from the Centre for the region's development, the Northeastern states still remain underdeveloped. The reasons are many. The paper factually and competently x-rays the situation, and affirms that, "the time has come to evaluate the lapses and to look at the remedial measures for best use of Central funds" in the region. The future could be bright, if the region opens up for trade with neighbouring countries.

Ranjan Singh's paper highlighting the problems and prospects of Manipur suggests measures for a sustainable development programme for that state. B.G. Verghese in a minutely and competently documented account, shows the immense water and bio-diversity resources of the Northeast, and writes, "the potential is huge, utilization small!" He shows how Bhutan doubled its per capita income in a few years and reached the top of the SAARC league! The author concludes his convincing analysis of hydro power and bio-resources available in the Northeast by saying, "An exciting opportunity beckons!"

The other papers in this section are by Prasenjit Biswas on development as complementarity. Kalyan Das writes on issues about livelihood. In

particular he addresses the problems of poverty and unemployment. He looks into the existing resource base and livelihood opportunities in Northeast India. Employment generation possibilities to reduce poverty in the context of globalization "onslaught" too are discussed. The paper, "Levels of Human Poverty across Districts and Population Groups in Assam," moves away from the traditional concept of economic poverty in terms of calories. The authors understand human poverty as a three-fold "deprivation." They are first, the deprivation of the choice of leading a long and healthy life; second, lack of facilities to acquire knowledge; and third, the absence of a decent standard of living. Policy implications for the removal of poverty are also dealt with in the paper.

Susmita Das and Sutapa Sengupta in their paper assess the level of "basic amenities" in the state of Meghalaya. Basic amenities include food, water, clothing, proper sanitation, and medical care at low cost. To speak of amenities such as presence of educational institutions, means of transport and communication and banking would call for a still "higher" level of living. And availability of television, car, telephone, etc. is beyond the reach of the great majority of people in the region. The present situation is such that only the more affluent sections of society can afford to have something more than the very basic amenities of life. The ever widening disparity will only hamper the development process. A way out of this impasse is urgently needed. The last two papers in the section are on border trade. Gurudas Das writes on the theory and practice of border trade, whereas K.C. Kabra and R.K.P.G. Singha reflect on border trade and its future prospects with reference to Mizoram.

The three papers under tourism contain M.P. Bezharuah's paper on "Sustainable Tourism and Economic Development of the North-East". The paper is a detailed study of the theme. "Tourism in Assam: Need for a Paradigm Shift" is the title of Abu Nazar Saied Ahmed's paper. The possibilities are so many, that only a political will can transform tourism in Assam into a major developmental agency in the state. This calls for a paradigm shift in tourism governance. Amitava Mitra's paper "A Sustainable Environment-Friendly Approach to Tourism Development in Arunachal Pradesh" shows the vast tourism potential of Arunachal's forest resources and biodiversity. The author also spells out policies and action plans for ensuring sustainable tourism in the state.

Moving on to the section on education the book presents three papers: N. B. Biswas' "Development of School Education among the Tribes of North-East India: A

Complementary Approach"; Anjan Saikia and K.C. Kapoor's "Wastage in Elementary Education: A Comparative Study of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh"; and Meghali Baruah's "Challenges of Higher Education in the North-East."

N.B. Biswas, citing from the report of "The Friends of Tribal Society" that had appeared in *The Asian Age* (June, 1997), writes that tribes in India are still in the periphery of progress, and that "Eighty four per cent of the male and ninety five per cent of the female tribal are illiterate. Ninety five per cent of the tribal population has no access to medical facilities, and ninety per cent have never known what electric light is ..." (p. 443). The paper, therefore, offers very practical suggestions by way of concluding remarks to improve the educational lot of tribal population in Northeast India. It emphasizes in particular the importance of knowing one's cultural richness, since "cultural variables affect education, teaching, learning and the growth and development of all learners" (p. 455).

Angan Saikia and K.C. Kapoor, in their paper, present a comparative study of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh from the point of view of "wastage" by which they mean school drop-outs. Meghali Baruah's paper on the "Challenges of Higher Education in the North-East" presents an overview of the situation in the country.

Finally, the section on health offers two papers: Substance Abuse and HIV / AIDS in North-East India by Hallelohim Ghonglah and "Women's Vulnerability to HIV / AIDS in Manipur by Jubita Hajarimayum. The former presents an overview of the problem in Northeast India and suggests possible ways to overcome it. The problem is not only a medical one, but also a social and a spiritual one. The paper on "Women's Vulnerability to HIV/AIDS in Manipur" is a study carried out among the Meithei women in the reproductive age group of 14-45 years in the Imphal West district of Manipur. Gender inequality, lack of autonomy, absence of decision-making power, and ignorance about health and their own rights make women more vulnerable to infection.

The references at the end of every paper and cross references provided in the index further make *Challenges of Development in North-East India* a very valuable and handy companion for everyone interested in the development of North-East India.

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Rafiq Dossani and Henry S. Rowen, *Prospects for Peace in South Asia*, Orient Longman Private Ltd., Hyderabad,2006, 424p, Spl. Indian price Rs.500/- (org. US $24.95).

The idea of peace in the context of Southasia assumes a complex political, military and economic make-up. Especially the increase in nuclearization of military arsenals as a competitive assertion of strategic superiority between India and Pakistan compounded with internal instability of fragile political systems produce a grave threat to security. The metaphor 'South Asia on a short fuse' still remains the central conceptual problematique amidst the angst of being 'vulnerable' to a possible arms race that extends to what the US under George Bush called the 'axis of evil'. The book seemingly highlights a US-centric perspective to glean through the political processes like Islamization and the rise of Hindu Right in Pakistan and India respectively to scour through the strategic doctrine of 'status quo' in Southasia that promotes the economic interests of the US in the best possible way. Such a gnarly reading of Southasia hardly gets at the many-layered cultural and historical convergences between articulations of national interests that often overlap by signaling possibilities of engagement across the daggers drawn. In portraying 'Kashmir' as a flashpoint of nuclear warfare sustained by equally militant regimes of religious right in both India and Pakistan, the book grossly undermines the possibilities of minimized conflicts that merely require a stable political will and not stability *per se*. The way the book defines the US interest in Southasian region (Introduction, p.16 and Chs.10 &13) gives it the place of cynosure for both India and Pakistan seeking strategic partnership with the US, who can tilt the balance of power to any of the side. The US, on its own terms, sees both India and Pakistan as allies for very different purposes, the former as a permanent ally in its geo-political games and the latter as a counterweight to China. If all these fragments of strategic alliances come with an inherently weak and shortsighted plan of peace and stability, it serves the US interest of arm twisting in the region by way of consolidating economic and security gains derived from the dependence of Southasian nations on the US. The dependence is deep throated, starting from purchase of military hardware down to analysis of strategic relations. It is the US that predicts the ebbs and flows of the tides in the Indian Ocean both literally and metaphorically. The book only understates the rising dependence on the US for the whole of the Southeast Asia and downplays the role of non-aligned diplomacy in the context of increasing weaponization. In a strong sense, much of the voluminous spaces within the book are devoted to descriptive

truisms of US foreign policy that got its ideological and operational support from an entirely negative characterization of regime types in India and Pakistan. The book also prescribes a robust economic determinism for Southasia as a *fait accompli* as it is for any contemporary neoliberal state system in assessing the problems and prospects of its foreign, military and economic policies. The weight of a perceived world order dominated by the US caters to the idiom of Morganthau's realism that reduces the structures of rivalry to an already intervened and mediated entity by a hegemon or by a superpower, a syndrome that very recently also wears the hat of 'strategic analysis' in the canons of international relations. The book stands out for its thrust on hegemonic stability without any possibility of transition that turns out to be a symptomatic description of Pakistan's anarchic role in sharp contrast to India's neoliberal shift towards multi-partner strategic relations in Southasia.

The first four essays in the section entitled "Pakistan: Politics and Kashmir are: "Islamic Extremism and Regional Conflict in South Asia" by Vali Nasr, "Constitutional and Political Change in Pakistan: The Military-Governance Paradigm" by Charles H. Kennedy, "The Practice of Islam in Pakistan and the Influence of Islam in Pakistani Politics" by C. Christine Fair and Karthik Vaidyanathan, and "Pakistan's Relations with Azad Kashmir and the Impact on Indo-Pakistani Relations" by Rifaat Hussain. All the four essays portray Pakistan as a case of 'failed democracy' that always balanced its internal instabilities with war games at the frontier and by reconstructing its relationships with the US and the West. To be specific, Vali Nasr's analysis of Pakistan's military regime harps on a socially constructed Islamist politics that falls in line with the neoliberal doctrine of economic dependence on international institutions without much ado about Islamism. Nasr significantly highlights the role of Mutahhidah Majlis Amal (MMA) in creating an environment of peace in Indo-Pak relationship and consequently, argued that the MMA acted as a countervailing force to greater Islamist parties within Pakistan's domestic politics. This limited understanding of the internal political contest between a conglomerate MMA and larger parties like Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League (PML) during the regime of Army unwittingly endorses the role of MMA in sustaining the Army rule of General Musharraf. The next essay by Charles H. Kennedy reads repetitive of issues pertaining to Islamism, looked albeit through a different point of view, like the evolving patterns of political legitimacy at the provincial level and constitutional stalemates. But the essay goes strong on chronicling the political mess in Pakistan without clearly figuring out which of the forces played roles upholding the sanctity of a constitutional state. In

fact the singular importance of a Constitutional State is not properly emphasized by Kennedy in his narration of political exigencies. Next essay by Christine Fair and Karthik Vaidyanathan makes an attempt to understand the state-society relationship from the perspective of examining the roots of Islamic practices in Pakistan's politics. Instead of developing a normative model of analysis, the central part of this essay adopts a perceived Islamist response to the West and apparently gets it supplemented from the responses to the questionnaire that dishes out statements such as West "care about poorer nations", "fair stance on Palestine situation" etc. (p.87) that obviously make the respondents express negative responses to the West at the practical, psychological and emotional levels. This is an attempted projection of Islamist reaction to the West, which is later supplanted by respondent's support towards banning the secessionist and sectarian political outfits, apparently a secular-rational response to Islamism. Further, the Pakistani response towards the US as portrayed show poorly the moral indictment that Pakistani opinion makers have towards US stance. The authors finally accept the invalidity of their method, data and analysis, when they pass the buck of failure to the respondents for giving what they call 'contradictory': "Pakistani respondents claim that they would like to see a decreased involvement of religious parties within politics, while still upholding that Pakistani law should be based upon Q'uran and Sunnah" (p.108). What the authors suppress is their pre-mediated style of eliciting responses that do not cohere in a neat framework of what they call 'policy community'. Post 9/11, Pakistani response to the presence of Taliban in Pakistan vis-à-vis American 'war on terror' forms the context of this essay that try to present Pakistani opinion as 'contradictory' from the vantage of US policy framework.

Rifaat Hussain cultivates an internalist realism of sort in suggesting ways and means of giving Azad Kashmir a due place within Indo-Pak relations. His narrative reconstruction of events that led to internecine border conflicts between India and Pakistan along with the US interest of keeping Pakistan to its side in its sojourn to Afghanisthan often displaces Azad Kashmir in the meta-narrative of nuclear rivalry. This merely portrays the incompleteness of any Pakistani initiative to politically handle the Kashmir issue, as the state of Pakistan is yet to discover the stable basis of bringing peace and development to Azad Kashmir. The author leaves out the implications of Pakistan's weak-willed response to the problems of Azad Kashmir, which in itself constitutes a major drawback for Pakistan's domestic policy.

This entire section assumes a few things, notably the rise of an uncontestable Islamism and its concomitant support to terrorist radicals that supplement Indo-Pak arms race in building up nuclear arsenals. This is a rather

straightjacket realism that merely supports a US-centric strategic perspective on the region.

The four essays in the next section entitled "India: Politics and Kashmir" are: "Who Speaks for India? The Role of Civil Society in Defining Indian Nationalism" by Ainslie T. Embrie, "Hindu Nationalism and the BJP: Transforming Religion and Politics in India" by Robert L. Hardgrave Jr., "Hindu Fundamentalism, Muslim Jihad and Secularism: Muslims in the Political Life of the Republic of India" by Barbara D. Metcalf and "Jammu and Kashmir in the Indian Union: Politics of Autonomy" by Chandrashekhar Dasgupta. These essays overcome the limited view of strained Indo-Pak relations by analyzing the socially constituted structures of State that enter into conflicting national interests. Embrie's essay revisits some of the well-established arguments about Hindutva-led hawkish positions against Pakistan with a smattering of discussions on an 'aggressive civil society' of contemporary times as well as centrist responses to secessionism in Kashmir and Nagaland. The essay is long on centrist perception of the health of Indian polity during the decade of seventies, while it is short on how Indian society practises politics of recognition. In his grand notion of civil society, Embrie minces words in thinking of a consensual politics, while he misrecognizes many facets of 'unity in diversity' that binds India to a state of chaos and difference without breaking its fragile sovereign existence. Hargrave's essay blows up the possibility of a permanent transformation of Indian State and society in the hands of Hindu chauvinists and its various outfits that presents a superficial account of how these forces attempt to drive India to a place of communal hatred and sacrilege, while the essay does not address the interstitial emergence of different forms of power-relations in the sphere of political economy. The punchline of the essay, "It may be a 'grave miscalculation' to suggest that Hindu extremism does not have international ramifications" (p.238) sounds extremely telescopic as the connection between India's foreign policy and activities of Hindu group abroad is tenuous except the fact that Hindutva leaders, during the time of being in the government never missed a chance to visit VHP headquarters abroad. Barbara Metcalf's essay on Hindu Ethnonationalism is an original work of analysis that does not reproduce the polarities of conflict. It rather emphasizes on the ideological orientation of RSS-VHP-BJP on the one hand and Jammat on the other. She succeeds in showing that Islam as a religion does not influence the fundamentalist forces. She clarifies that the rise of fundamentalist Islamist forces stem from sources very different from doctrines embedded in faith. They arise from an ideological othering of the Muslims or the Hindus, which is a kind of 'psycho-drama' (p.231). Dasgupta's essay on

'Politics of Autonomy' is probably the best essay in reviewing historical and political developments in Jammu and Kashmir. The essay stays as close as possible to developments in the field, while it concludes splendidly by stating, "A measure of vagueness about the final outcome is probably an essential element of a constructive approach to resolve differences between Indian and Pakistan on the issue of Kashmir."(p.258)

The third section entitled "India's and Pakistan's Nuclear Doctrines and US Concerns" brings out the real concerns of the volume, namely the US concern about balance of power in South Asia as part of its long-standing strategic necessity of keeping China at large. The anti-Communist cold war slant of US foreign policy gets its backroom support from the kind of arms race that India and Pakistan indulge in. The US interest lies in having the last word in case there is a flashpoint between the two. Diplomatically speaking, both India and Pakistan attempt to win over the US support to pursue their own agenda by avoiding any confrontation with US interests. This gives the US the enviable position of a superpower that decides and dictates terms and deliberates about the internal and external compulsions of its subordinate allies in Southasia. The whole volume is geared to contribute to this US standpoint. The very first essay by Michael Krepon on the theme of de-escalation presents the Indian and Pakistani calculations of military strategy during ten month long mobilization in 2002 as a paradoxical measure of stability-instability, a mutually assured game of destruction. The point is to understand how such war-games of escalation/de-escalation strengthen the US presence in the Southasian geopolitics. What Krepon ventures in his elaborate discussion on strategies of deterrence are largely borrowed from cold war continental ballistic missiles competition and the imagery of star wars, which he applies in the context of Indian subcontinent. This takes into account the crucial input of mutually damaging strategies that the other side can adopt such as 'economic strangling'. By turning a fig that is yet to come in the subcontinent, the analysis presents the US (read NATO) line of strategic thinking in a manner manifest before it really comes. The lever for his analysis springs from the vulnerability of both India and Pakistan from each other having similar striking capability. Ironically it is this vulnerability of parties engaged in arms race that does the groundwork for a pro-US stance in foreign policies of both India and Pakistan. Krepon's analysis builds up this possibility of 'third party' intervention in the relations between India and Pakistan. Although Krepon suggested substantive political engagement between India and Pakistan centring the Kashmir issue, he seems to predict the possibility of third party intervention in any guise (p.280). Peter Levoy's essay on "Pakistan's Nuclear Doctrine" mostly authenticated the popularly held fears about irresponsible uses of nuclear weapons that are articulated

by Pakistan's civilian and military officials. Thereby, the essay completely ignores Pakistani concerns about de-nuclearization and its attendant demystification of India's evil intentions. The essay goes to the extent of airing an unsubstantiated fear of western powers about the possibility of transfer of nuclear technologies from Pakistani sources to some 'terrorist' groups, which is a re-affirmation of USA's CTBT stance. The essay is superbly written in a backroom boys' 'democratic war game' style that exports nuclear war as the *summum bonnum* of nation-building politics by various actors. While doing so, the essay selectively privileges some of these actors of the domestic scene to determine the course of Indo-Pak relations. Rajesh Basrur's essay on 'coercive diplomacy' practised by both Pakistan and India strikes a significantly different chord in the whole volume. For the first time, when the reader is tired of grasping the monotonic war game tome, Basrur talks of a situation of compellence between India, Pakistan and the US, all engaged in a mutual game of containment. But Basrur brings out the salience of each of the sides very accurately. For India, the US, with its presence in Afghanistan, is a softer target of compellence. Given the disadvantage of Pakistan in terms of strategic strength, the US appears to its radar only as an interceder. These two different assignments of the same referee (the US) confined in the hotspot of Indo-Pak theatre, for Basrur, also gives it the advantage of refusing to the referee the Indo-Pak conflict (p.315). Probably, this superpower option of the United Sates also acts as a deterrent for both India and Pakistan not to strike first and begin the fare. Barsur characterizes such deterrence as 'non-traditional' with a 'hair-trigger status'. He substantiates his argument by citing the very real warning from the US about detection of release of energy equivalent to Hiroshima bomb in the outer space by an asteroid at the same time when India and Pakistan were nearing the brink in 2002. The warning made everybody aware of the cosmic event so that no one mistakes it to be nuclear detonations. What he projects in the essay is about the lessons learnt by both the Indian and Pakistani states soon after December 13 attack on Indian parliament that set in motion a chain reaction of military strategies and weighing of each other's nuclear options by both the parties. But he hypostatizes the situation when he says, "Compellence through a third party is inherently problematic because the interests of the third party tend to be its own, and these may be a drag on the compelling power. Concessions extracted from the target state are reversible, and the investment in ejecting a coercive threat can be brought to nought whenever the state chooses."(p.324) This weakens Basrur's progressive analysis of the trilateral compellence. That compellence and deterrence are parts of the strategy of overcoming a security threat and a diplomatic difficulty gets blurred in this turning of 'factors' into 'actors'. One

instance of such a transformation is available in Indian media's construction of 9/11 kind of attack on December13 by some terrorists from across the border. Basrur's nuanced analysis could have derived strengths from the inherent social formations and mobilizations that shape the opinions in India and Pakistan's post-colonial societies, which cannot be entirely subjected to 'deterrence' and 'compellence' kind of orientation. As he pontificates both India and Pakistan's search for strategic spaces, the internal divergences and heteronomies of both the societies present a different picture of shared historical memory and identity. Especially how India, being a democratic state, frames a few individuals for the episode of parliament attack. Similar things are also available with Pakistan, where the judiciary is often penalized for being against the national interest. The last essay of the volume expresses the overarching thematic of the volume in its title, "U.S. Interests in South Asia". The author of this essay Howars B. Schaffer takes a regressive view of India's foreign policy by blaming it as anti-American, when he seems to suggest that New Delhi should not have antagonized America. He goes on to say, "For many Americans, India seemed to make a practice of biting the hand that might have fed it."(p.329) Such a statement reminds one of PL-480 aid and very recently, the impassioned defense of Indo-US nuclear deal that subjects India long term defense and multilateral subordination through legal measures such as Hyde Act and Patent regimes. That India had bitten such an American clasp is inadvertently admitted and so the desire to make India see itself as an indebted and grateful nation that should pay heed to America's embrace as a 'quasi-ally' against Chinese Communism is so blatantly proposed. Apart from such hard-nosed power interests of America, the essay euphemizes the US interest in India's growing economy. In all, the essay fails to understand India's track record of an independent foreign and economic policy that seems to dominate India's national interest. Although India has given in to some extent to US military kowtowing, it still refuses to agree to a permanent stature of a sub-ordinate ally who must remain faithful to US skullduggery in policy matters. The essay lacks a balanced understanding of perspectival and positional differences between the US and India and it fails to properly explore unimpeachable grounds of mutual cooperation, if there exists any, that would benefit both the sides. The US-centric slant in India's foreign policy operates only at a discursive level to make the nation-state of India realize its own strength that never allows it to abandon the singularity and tenacity of national interest.

The tenor of most of the essays see the US as the most sought after ally for both India and Pakistan on which both the Southasian states evince close competition. This renders the US simultaneously present and absent in

Indo-Pak affairs. This also makes the US vulnerable to quandaries of bilateral relations, of which the US apparently has only a disciplining interest. The volume re-iterates US interest in most of its essays, while a few essays written by Southasian scholars present an objective and authentic analysis of the role of US. One can clearly read two distinct approaches in this volume: One, a US-centric transvaluation of domestic politics in India and Pakistan without assessing the possible ways of redemption and another, the overwhelming diktats of the US foreign policies to tailor independent policies of India and Pakistan so that their elations are sufficiently mediated by the US. Both these approaches lack the support and substance that are otherwise so amply available in analyses of internal politics of the respective states. Rather the volume reproduces a part of the available material for no new inferences in most of its pages. Descriptive truisms that follow from chronicling of events without anchorage to the domain of everyday politics dominate the tenor of holding onto a constituency for Uncle Sam. Hence the volume fails to inspire any hope in sustained peace in Southasia. Most of its essays are second rate observations on swings in foreign policy circles that can hardly describe the increasingly complex and subtle ways in which India and Pakistan work in the domain of international politics. Essays that add to new knowledge are in a sense by the 'native informants' who would otherwise represent their countries in any intellectual exercise. The editorial discretions too are in-expansive as they hardly fulfill the role of being the links in the fragmented and ruptured narratives of US led peace and stability in the region. This is the Orwellian predicament of Southasia.

Reviewd by

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Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*: *The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity* (revised edition), Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2006 (1995), pp.ix+108, price Rs.130/-

The book under review is one of the founding texts of understanding the emerging contours of Dalit identity and ideology. The book that originally had seen the light of the day in 1995 is now republished. The text has not changed much, only the context has become more embedded and rooted.

The author revised her book of late, possibly with a reaffirmation of her faith in the relevance of Dalit struggles that demanded a greater clarity. Omvedt presents the Dalit emergence with a remarkable political and cultural correctness of a critique of Hindu ideological superiority. The book in its ten chapters presents the case of Dalit emergence in the form of counter-hegemonic struggles, while it underscores the process of Dalit identity formation as a constitutive element of democracy and modernity.

The first chapter entitled, "Introduction" discusses the social base of Dalit movement that combines the ex-untouchables with non-Brahmin castes. Dalit identity and Dalit consciousness take the form of a discursive resistance to reformist Hinduism by moving a step beyond. This step beyond is conceptualized by Omvedt in the following terms,

In contemporary times they (Dalits) draw on such leaders as Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar; they appeal to heroes of revolt such as Birsa Munda and Veer Narayan Singh; they claim the traditions of Buddha and Carvak, Mahavir, Kabir and Guru Nanak and Basavappa; they claim heroes like Shivaji but contests the Hinduist interpretation of him; they claim the glories of Mohenjo-daro and the heritage of pre-state tribals as opposed to that of plundering Aryan tribes. In contrast to the secularist opposition to Hindutva they proclaim a politics of identity, an in contrast to reformist Hindu identities *they define 'Hinduism' itself as an oppressive class/caste/patriarchal force.* (p.5)

One can note here several references to a historical past of location and cultural distinctness that are 'claimed' by the Dalits. Such claims are also based on a politics of difference that relativizes the validity of such claims. The crucial question is, *does the politics of Dalit identity need an articulation of specific claims in positioning the identity of the Dalits over and against a Hindu mainstream?* Omvedt can be said to have veered between a pull toward redistribution and recognition and a push toward an articulated authenticity. She presented her dilemma in terms of caste-class dichotomy, when she says, referring to Phule's notion of 'ideology', "This one did not recognize community/caste as a node of exploitation ... *The formation of a class ideology of this type created a caste ideology of a specific type in reaction*, one which set up caste in opposition to class as a cultural/social factor, a non-economic factor." (p.41) Indeed Omvedt attempts to see 'caste' as a category that arises out of a process of social, economic and cultural exclusion, so much so that social movements by untouchables

and lower castes were looked down upon and even delegitimized by the nationalists and Marxists. Omvedt portrays the common ideological grounds of nationalist-Leftist-Marxist-Gandhian strands of social and political movements having an antagonism toward any movement that voiced caste oppression as an issue and all of them shared an ideological subscription to mainstream Hindu nationalism. But this kind of a hegemonic construction of Hinduism and an idea of centralized India creates many folds of historical and political exclusion. At one level, it paved the way of partition as a measure to avoid giving too many concessions to Muslims and also stave off the possibility of making India into a decentralized and federal province. All these were done just in order to have a 'centralized state structure' (p.64) that reproduced Manchester under state ownership. At another level, the ideological hegemony of Hindu political and cultural formations resulted into an 'anti-caste' movement that had an anti-northern and anti-brahmin identification. Such movements had a regional framework and it grew to an 'emotive slogan' against Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan. Positively speaking, anti-caste movements took a reflexive anti-Aryan, non-Hindi and anti-'brahman-baniya' turn, which she described thus: "Anti-Hinduism was taking on a rather complex, anti-northern, anti-centralist character."(p.54) Periyar inspired "self-respect' movement of 1930s and Ambedkar's attempts at liberating untouchables throughout 1920 to 1940 and beyond come into focus in the book at lengths. Notable punchlines include Ambedkar's pronouncement that he was "born a hindu but would not die a Hindu". A song published in Ambedkar's weekly *Janata* is cited by Omvedt that establishes a Shudra-proletariat equation (p.45) in the political outfit called Independent Labour Party (ILP) floated by Ambedkar that became the largest opposition in Bombay Legislative Council in 1936 elections. Such fireworks by social movements of the lower castes substantially exposed the upper caste-bourgeois orientation of emerging post-colonial polity in 1930s.

Omvedt followed an argumentative strategy of exposing the caste-class alliance in the domain of political economy to the extent that it constitutes an ideological hegemony. As opposed to this, she highlights the role played by alliances of lower castes and various movements that aimed at redeeming the oppressed castes from the subjection by dominant Hindu political elites. This strategy of unfolding the emergence of lower-caste struggles against Hindu dominance produces a convergence in terms of Dalit-bahujan and other movements from the margins of mainstream Hindu nation-space. Omvedt's emphasis on regional identities such as Dravidian movement,

Kashmiriyat and tribo-national movements of Northeast India mobilizes ideas of de-brahminization, de-saffronization and de-territorialization of anti-caste formations in its multitude. All these put together constitute, for Omvedt, a single moment of 'visions' that de-institute the Brahminical forms of power from the domain of law, public discourse and resistance. Omvedt characterized this moment by citing veteran Marxist leader A.K. Roy's pamphlet called, "The New Dalit Revolution" (p.79). Omvedt is in full agreement with Roy, when Roy wrote,

The culture of the people, struggle of the oppressed like that of Birsa Munda of Chotanagpur and Veer Narayan Singh of Chattisgarh would be highlighted which is now obscured and would be restored to its rightful place above the wars and conspiracies of feudal kings and colonial rulers which now crowd the pages of history. From Buddha to Lenin it would be a unique journey, a new search for a spirit of emancipating millions, a new religion not only a new party, out to make a new history for mankind without exploitation, subjugation and with justice. (p.80)

This position taken by Omvedt through the politically correct synthesis between Marxism and Dalit ideology as proposed by A.K. Roy is a radical deconstruction of Hegelian residue of a critique of an emancipatory project that synthesizes the agency of emancipation into an abstract universalizable identity. So also Omvedt's position undercuts Kantian notion of civic-liberal individualism that merely reconstructs the domain of politics from what is 'sensible' and 'meaningful' by taking them as things-in-themselves. Beyond political and social theory, Omvedt also characterizes the unspeakable Dalit experience in terms of its creative rendering of self-consciousness, when she affirms in relation to Sita, the banished heroine of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, "In a folk poem of Uttar Pradesh for instance, Sita refuses to go back even when Laxman has been sent to bring her, and instead raises her sons on her own and gives them her father's name, in a half-way return to matriliny".(p.99) This portrayal of Sita as the mother who refuses to follow the norms of patriarchical-brahminical society also becomes a figure of emancipation in a counter depiction to *Ramayana*. This is also a Dalit enterprise of self-definition that renders brahminical claims to history as repressive. Omvedt elaborates this creative discourse of liberation in following words,

(...) Ramayana: not as a story of Rama's triumph and the ideal family. But a story of his conquest over Dravidian and tribal native inhabitants, of the triumph of patriarchy over matriarchy, of the suppression of women

connected with the establishment of a stable agricultural society. (Sita is after all *bhumikanya,* she was found below a furrow.) It is ultimately a story that has many renditions in a long era of class/caste/gender struggle, of a conquest over long time span, but also of the resistance and uniting of the conquered, a reversal, a forecasting of the liberation of peasants, dalits, women and tribals. (p.100)

At the same time she cautions against 'desperate beatings of an imagined upper-caste past"(p.101) in order to give her analysis an Ambedkarian 'moral import'. Just as historicity of liberation struggles is neither a mere remembrance nor forgetting of the past, Omvedt's Ambedkarian strategy of speaking against 'caste' as the "monster that would always cross their path" (p.52) form an essential condition for forging Dalit identity, while it discounts the idea of a unified national identity. Omvedt does not merely give an agent-centred moral argument, she expands the space of morality from protean notion of identity and alterity to a space beyond the existing social hierarchy. In her reading of Dalit Panthers (chap.9), she categorically states, "If the proletarianism of dalit identity was a new universalism, a new claim to being a kind of vanguard it was also an effort to define the entire Indian revolution in terms of the upsurge of the low castes ..."(p.78). This is a reconstruction of moral spaces lost within caste system by way of responding to emergent forms of class hierarchies that situate moral agency not merely on a Dalit-centric discourse, but in a new discourse of justice and liberty. Omvedt produces a knowledge of the 'sensible' by mediating between the polarities of Dalit struggle: Brahminism and Dalitisation. She goes along with the strategy of posing the latter against the former as advocated in Dalit movements, but departs from this usual strategy by suggesting the possibility of a creative synthesis between proletarian class identity and concrete forms of oppression.

Re-publication of this founding text of understanding Dalit movement re-configures significant questions of our time, such as, affirmative action, protective discrimination and questions of representation. Without falling into some of Omvedt's anthropological search for authenticity, these questions can be addressed more rigorously by taking into account situations and events. The recent claims of inclusion of the Dalits by replacing the ascriptional paradigm of evaluation of merit in the national context and the claim of Adivasis of Assam to be recognized as 'scheduled tribe' finds its right echoes in the inner recesses of Dalit consciousness that is depicted in the book. That the question of recognition is not merely a question of recognition of an

identity and their empowerment is brought out in the pages of the book by a re-iteration of justice and its denial. The book immensely succeeds in raising our sensibility against any distortion in the lived experience of un-emancipated Dalits. It is, therefore, a radical affirmation of a vision that goes beyond the apparent.

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