

Review Essay
Re-Thinking “Community” in Religion and Development as a
Milieu

by Tamer Söyler

Gurpreet Mahajan & Surinder S. Jodhka, eds.

***Religion, Community and Development: Changing Contours of
Politics and Policy in India***

Abingdon and New Delhi: Routledge, 2010. xii + 336 pp.

Everything flows. So goes the famous aphorism which has been repeatedly used in academia to characterize the essence of the Ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus’ thought. This established statement often gives social scientists the luxury to make bold claims about social phenomena without any pretense of offering exhaustive analyses of the nature of social change. To claim that the social world has changed fundamentally in the last decades is a good example for this conventional practice. Since everything flows, and nothing stays the same, one would normally think that, to underline the fact that the social world is in constant change, without offering a comprehensive theoretical and historical analysis, does nothing but state the obvious. Although it is not problem free¹, the concept of “the rise of the Global South”, by focusing on the empirical phenomena of the emergence of so-called formerly emerging countries, does explain the specific character of the shift the world is experiencing today on the meta-level: the world has clearly gained a multicentric character, and it is not possible to investigate the social world with a set of presupposed universalisms anymore (Rehbein, 2010). In a world in which a good number of scholars (regardless of which generation they belong to or from what disciplines and schools of thought they derive their ideas) are still, in one way or the other, bounded by old ways of imagining the social world, *Religion, Community and Development: Changing Contours of Politics and Policy in India* (hereafter abbreviated as ‘RCD’) comes forward as a novel effort from the scholars of one of the most important countries of the Global South, India, to unthink the conventional practices of social sciences and tries to come up with an epistemological framework which would respond to the urgent need to modify the ontological premises of yesterday’s social world (Beck, 2003).

The book is a collection of fourteen articles, which are all informed to a good extent by the empirical research that the respective authors have conducted over the years; and/or, a closer examination of the *Sachar Committee Report (SCR)* – along with the *Indian Census and National Service Scheme (NSS)* findings – providing clear entry points and substantial bases for the contributors’ arguments. While all chapters directly or indirectly come across fundamental discussion topics in Indian Social Sciences (e.g. development, modernity, modernization, secularization, the role of hierarchy in the Indian social structure), each chapter has an individual focus as well. If one tries to sketch a thematic overview of the fourteen chapters, two topics become specifically apparent: a critique of conventional social science indicators, and the relationship between religion and development with an elaboration on profiles of different religious communities in India.

¹It is almost a fact that one cannot come up with a geographical conceptualization which would satisfy all parties from different parts of the world equally. The same problem applies to the concept “Global South”. One can at least argue in the case of “Global South” that as a specific geographical reference point it is rather unambiguous and if it has an ideological baggage at all, that would be actually favoring the ‘emerging countries’ which in return is enough reason for me to make use of it in this review.

Such a thematic categorization can neither do justice to the individual chapters, as it excludes a set of specific topics which has been raised craftily by each author, nor avoid cross-cutting themes as the topics do overlap on different levels, vertically and horizontally. Nevertheless, as it is not the intention of the review to rehearse here what is already given in the table of contents of the book, a framework will be constructed to aid the readers in their efforts to grasp the topics in their larger contexts and make it possible for the review to respond to the issues raised in the book in a systematic manner.

Mahajan (Chapter 1), who seems to take the editorial responsibility to set the grounds for the contributors to focus on a set of common themes (despite the fact that the book lacks a generic introductory chapter and a conclusive one, her chapter is an introductory effort summarizing the main lines of argument, which will persistently appear throughout the book), after giving a somewhat typical introduction to the Eurocentric premises of the secularization debate, claims that a great number of empirically oriented social scientific studies have been persistently pointing to the fact that religion has not disappeared² as it was predicted, and the need to understand the other [sic] in its own terms has become even more pressing throughout the last decades (pp. 1, 2, 3). Her critique of making use of established social science indicators takes a phenomenological and participatory form which is shared by some of the other contributors as well (e.g. Chapters 4, 6, 11). Although one of the fundamental goals of the RCD is defined at the outset as to raise theoretical and methodological questions, the readers will observe that most of the philosophical investigation done in the book is implicit (e.g. Although they are explicitly engaging with the methodological questions to a great extent, neither Mahajan nor Guru directly addresses them head-on). As scattered and ambiguous as the book's position on epistemological, methodological and ontological matters might be, they nevertheless provide readers with useful ways of understanding Indian social reality. A word or two perhaps needs to be said about the philosophical (theory of science) approach of the book.

A closer scrutiny of chapters, especially the ones which are clearly drawing on the phenomenological tradition, will reveal that the contributors to the volume do not make any exhaustive claims that phenomenology and participatory methodology are the only ways to approach the Indian reality. Thus, the contributors persistently surround their analyses with rich use of statistics and emphases to social structural factors (for the use of statistics, see Chapters 7, 8, 12; for emphases to structural factors, see Chapters 6, 7, 11). The overall attitude dominating the chapters is definitely not giving a sense of trying to pour oil in troubled waters (e.g. using projection as a defense mechanism and mentioning the importance of structural factors repeatedly in order not to give the impression of exaggerating to the role of agency in shaping social life); it goes more in the direction that the authors are expressing strong skepticism about the validity of externally imposed general theoretical schemes (e.g. one size fits all, colonial impositions of Eurocentric theories) which have been long claiming openly to tell everything about the Indian reality. They claim that in order to understand the Indian social phenomena correctly, researchers should carry out their investigations with reference to specific cases, and in the context of RCD, those cases are religious communities.

In order to tackle the relationship between religion and development, Mahajan makes use of Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) as her entry point. FBOs are also one of the focal points of the Religions and Development Programme (RaD)³ of the University of Birmingham, of which the second editor of the book, Jodka (Chapter 8), is the country coordinator. According to Mahajan, while the New Right Movement has created enough space for FBOs to nourish and assert their policies, the multiculturalist wave provided the normative grounds for FBOs, increasing their influence (pp. 6, 7, 8). The subtitle of religion and development Mahajan sets in the introduction is followed by Kanungo, who takes *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)* as his entry point (Chapter 4); Patel, who sketches the similarities between *Ramakrishna Mission* and Christian congregations (Chapter 5); Heredia, who establishes an analogy between Latin American Christianity's conception of development and that of Indian (Chapter 6); Robinson, who gives an overview of the Christian communities in India (Chapter 7); Jodhka, who focuses on Sikh community in specific reference to

²It is indeed a simplification to state that the theories of secularization have promoted the idea of disappearance of religion without dedicating some space to explain what kind of alternative forms the secularization process has taken over time. However, as a proper introduction to the secularization debate would warrant an additional essay, I risk here being perceived as an essentialist from the standpoint of a 'secularization expert'. For a broader discussion of the secularization debate, see Lambert (1999).

³See the link to access the relevant working papers: www.religionsanddevelopment.org/index.php?section=47

caste (Chapter 8); and Kaur, whose interest is to illustrate that there is an ambiguous relationship between socio-economic indicators of literacy and education levels of socio-religious communities and their respective religious affiliations (Chapter 12). The editors of the book are aware that, as important as they are, investigations of religious communities without including cross-community approaches, in which qualitative data can be used for testing of hypotheses, do not constitute rigorous proof of theories. That is why the book aims to construct “profile[s] of communities other than the Muslims” for comparative purposes (p. 19). While Heredia (Chapter 6) and Robinson (Chapter 7) focus on Christian communities in India, Jodhka sketches an overview of the Sikh community (Chapter 8). In order to “discuss issues raised by the SCR and assess its findings” (p. 19), Alam (Chapter 9), Fazal (Chapter 10) and SriRanjani (Chapter 14) shed some light on specific issues concerning the Muslim community; Sheth (Chapter 2) and Ali (Chapter 3) set the grounds for the political dimensions of the debate; and although she does not specifically focus on one minority group in particular, Bajpai (Chapter 13) investigates the Indian conceptions of minority with a special emphasis on the quota system.

As is most of the time the case for edited books, the readers will realize that RCD comprises chapters which are manifesting many individual differences between the contributors’ perspectives. Unfortunately, these important nuances cannot be dealt with in a general discussion of this kind. All a review such as this one can do is attempt to unveil certain trends which, notwithstanding the different nuances, the book manifests and the readers will come across throughout the book. These preliminary remarks have brought the review right to the heart of the subject without, however, dealing with the central claim of the book: investigating new ways of imagining the social world in relation to ‘development’. In order to negotiate the complexity of arguments RCD offers on this point, without losing a genuine coherence of argumentation, the review will now address a set of important points Mahajan raises. The conclusion will comprise an interpretation of and response to these points.

According to Mahajan, in order to be able to investigate the Indian social reality in a novel way, five points need to be kept in mind. Firstly, a special emphasis needs to be put on the “changes in self-perception [of the narrators] and [how they are] social[ly] represent[ed]”, and how these changes “had an impact on [development] discourses” needs to be investigated (p. 4). Secondly, an empirical investigation of the Indian social reality has to be drawn on a large pool of perspectives, which should comprise “diverse conceptions of life, histories and experience[s]” without excluding any perspective in a totally arbitrary way (*ibid.*). The third point is very much related to the second one with an emphasis on conceptions of good life. Mahajan urges that “due recognition needed to be given to each culture and the conceptions of good life that it presents through its many expressions” (p. 6). Fourthly, the nature of the self has to be put under scrutiny, and the existential fact that the self is embedded in the community membership which is part of a seamless web with diverse and conflicting voices within it has to be taken into account (p. 7). Finally, as the inhospitable market economy is creating more inequalities everyday, it has to be acknowledged that spaces for the re-emergence of religious communities as the basis of new solidarities have been constantly created (p. 8). Therefore, using the religious community as a unit of analysis appears to follow from a closer examination of the empirical reality which in the Indian case is being transformed by the economic liberalization in the last two decades (p. 19).

As was aforementioned, although the contributors have their individual ways of approaching the empirical reality, it is possible to argue that RCD as a unit is committed to the basic requirements of doing empirical science and takes a “realist ontology” position regarding the nature of reality (p. 72). This point is particularly important and deserves some attention: While RCD acknowledges that the reality is seen through human conceptions of it, it also argues that the empirical world ‘talks back’ to the very conceptions of the social scientists, providing substantial grounds for social scientists to implement the process of empirical validation. Such a clear stance on the nature of reality takes RCD beyond a purely constructivist critique of Eurocentric social science frameworks and determines its position on how to perceive and explain reality: that is, conceptualization based on empirical phenomena. These preliminary remarks clarify how RCD understands the discussion around social classification. To put in simple words, in order to study the structures of a respective society, social scientists follow the practice of putting people into groups, and while doing so, the factors they take into account depend on the ways they see the nature, experience and

explanation of reality. Despite the fact that non-Western social realities have always been in many ways different from Western realities, in Western and non-Western Social Sciences alike, class has long been the fundamental basis for making sense of social classification. After the so-called cultural turn movement in social sciences, emphases have changed and the social science indicators which were mostly based on economic analyses of the respective societies have mostly lost their privilege in scientific inquiries. With the rise of the Global South, the world has become even more complex in a way that social scientists were almost forced to acknowledge the fact that the good old factors of classification alone were not adequate in grasping the social realities in different parts of the world within their particular local configurations. Against this background, RCD explores new ways of understanding religious communities, classification and, consequently, inequality. The book does not see religious communities only as a group of people having a set of shared religious and cultural beliefs, but also as a group which, after all, might not be as divided as has hitherto been imagined along the lines of class, occupation, region, location, gender, and language (p. 14). Surprisingly enough, perhaps because of the very fact that the book is composed of papers from an academic workshop which did not aim neither to guide graduate students in their research pursuits nor to write a companion for social science research, RCD does not provide a sound theoretical framework to aid the social scientists in grasping the existing social reality or a solid basis for developing the necessary methodological tools. Because the reservations which are expressed in this review for the overarching research attitude of the book are only with respect to certain details, I would like to deal with this theoretical and methodological issue briefly in the next and final paragraph of this paper.⁴ This will also help me to send the word of my support to the *milieu* research approach which I believe could bring in a new perspective to the related research efforts. It will be argued that as Bourdieu connects 'the culture factor' in a systematical way to the 'social class factor', a related methodological approach based on his conception of *habitus* in relation to that of *milieu* might provide a set of useful methods to achieve what the book is striving for.

Although a conventionally written paper is usually supposed to be composed of three arbitrary parts -theory, methodology and empirical findings -these separate sections are, in reality, embedded within each other in such a way that one cannot separate and isolate one from another. In the case of Bourdieu, his underpinning theory is related to social structure and his concept of *habitus* is drafted as a fundament appearing as the founding and unifying element of society. In Bourdieu's theoretical imagination, *habitus groups* form *milieus* and (if one entertains the thought of using Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*) a person's *being-in-this-world* (*Dasein*) is very much influenced by her position in this broader milieu picture. According to this particular way of conceptualizing a respective society, without locating any given narrator in a constructed milieu picture, any effort a social scientist makes to understand the narrator is incomplete. According to Bourdieu, individuals' behaviours rely on learning and forming patterns, and the methodological approach developed by Michael Vester (2003) and his colleagues, by drawing on Bourdieu's sociology, *Habitus Hermeneutics* (*HH*) can serve as a novel way of focusing on the previously mentioned set of patterns from a life-course perspective. To put it another way, *HH* is an approach promising to take the researchers beyond the points of mere descriptions of the social phenomena without a broader framework of analysis, and pure theoretical speculations without adequate substantial empirical evidence. Given the ways the goals of RCD are expressed in fourteen chapters, one can argue that it is possible to satisfy all the relevant criteria by making use of Bourdieu's sociology, Bielefeld School's *Habitus Hermeneutics*, and Heidegger's concept of *Dasein*.⁵

⁴My perspective which is dominating my interpretation throughout this paragraph has been influenced and mostly shaped by my discussions with Prof. Dr. Boike Rehbein and my interpretation of his several writings (2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2010, 2011). However, neither him nor anybody else is responsible for the mistakes and misinterpretations in this review except myself. Although these discussions have comprised readings of Heidegger and Bourdieu, as I have not placed any specific references to the respective authors in the body of this review, I did not follow the convention of acknowledging sources which are not immediately relevant. I also would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge my indebtedness to the participants of the colloquiums at the Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, and the students of my seminars which took place at the same institution.

⁵Because of the reasons one does not need to rehearse here, most of the academics have to write in a language (in the most general sense of the word) which is not their own. This brings a set of problems. A serious issue for the non-native speakers is the struggle to keep track of their specific use of the respective languages in order to maintain a somewhat 'authentic' and 'personal' writing -whatever it may mean- while expressing themselves in ways which would be perceived as 'fluent' and 'academic' by the native speakers (in both senses of the word) of the academia. All of these would have been fine, if it was really possible to

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differentiate between one's 'own' use of language and that of the others. When we write, one way or the other and regardless of the fact that we realize this or not, we always draw on others' ideas together with the ways those ideas are expressed. However, even if we want, we simply cannot reproduce ideas and forms of expression exactly as they are used by others. From this point of view, I am of the opinion that (perhaps a rather naïve one) knowledge and various forms of expression belong to us all as the humanity and it might be most of the times just a waste of time for the writer (and for the reader for that matter) trying to remember or find out the exact reference to be acknowledged each time. If one really needs to 'acknowledge' something, one could perhaps consider acknowledging the fact that most of the time referencing is simply a sequential matter and almost always not immediately relevant with the core message of the respective text. I strongly doubt if one fails to give enough respect to iconic names, for example Marx, by not acknowledging him in every other sentence that he would turn in his grave. And those who are not yet Marxs themselves, I think they would just appreciate that their ideas are elaborated by young scholars and leave this rather unnecessary job of 'hunt for the origins' to the academic bounty hunters. And if a writer is missing a reference merely because of untidiness, this already means that she is suffering enough in her occupation and needs to be left alone anyways. All these might sound a bit strange to the reader who never questioned the established conventions of the practice of acknowledgement and referencing, but I would like this final footnote to stand as a generic reference for the sources I possibly 'missed' in this review. Those readers who may not be convinced by the view and somewhat honesty presented in this note can go on by pushing the idea into a conclusion and reflecting on the matter whether or not the proofreading business (keeping in mind that good proofreading means writing a 'new' text, just like good translation, making it literally a business) is ethical.