

## Interrogating the Realm of Faith

by Sudhir Kumar

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■ *The Realm of Faith: Subversion, Appropriation*  
■ *and Dominance in The Western Himalaya*

■ by Mahesh Sharma

■ Shimla, IAS

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Mahesh Sharma's book under review is a sincere interrogation of the use and misuse of the realm of faith in order to understand the complex dynamics of power relations implicit in the strategies of subversion, appropriation and dominance in the western Himalaya (Himachal Pradesh to be more precise). To his credit, it can justifiably be said that he deconstructs the little traditions of faith operative in the Himalayas, the abode of Gods. In doing so, he casts his net wide: local Gods, Goddesses and Godlings, deities, Ghosts, omens, tribal rituals and beliefs, caste-system, pilgrimages, folk-lore, and temple-management with special reference to Chamba, Sirmaur and Kangra religions between 1850 and 1994—nothing escapes his attention and critical gaze. The thrust of his project is on "the understanding of precise mechanism by which the nuances of protest and dominance are asserted along with such methods as penetration, acculturation and accommodation" (as Professor V.C. Shrivastava says in his "Foreword").

Sharma also outlines the aim of the study in his "Preface": "The aim of the study is to understand various aspects of social, particularly the interaction between the structured and informal components of faith as conceived in the popular belief and the organized religion." This necessitates a "discussion, in parts, on interaction among the ritually high and low, the process of making caste boundaries and caste markers . . . and role of ritual in subversion and assertion of the caste" (xi). Throughout the book,

Sharma addresses these issues using an interdisciplinary approach and methodology that straddles History, Sociology, Politics and Anthropology. In the first chapter, "Popular Belief: Godlings, Ghosts and Omens," he analyses the anthropomorphic aspect of faith prevailing in the regions of Kangra, Kullu and Chamba and emphasizes the tradition of religious syncretism so well entrenched among the rural masses cutting across religious boundaries. Thus, the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Sikhs and the Muslims would frequently worship at one another's shrines—often in contravention of the dogmatic religious injunctions. Hence, the (sub)version for the classical or the sanskritic at the popular level. Ancestor worship, naga (snake) worship, the fertility cults (worship of trees like *pipal* and banyan), *pir* worship, and *deota* worship—all are the examples of the prevailing anthropomorphism of faith in Himachal Pradesh. Interestingly, these deities, deotas, bhuts and demons were/are considered a part of their daily existence, making their existence integral to the unknown. The popularity of the pirs, faqirs, sanyasis and vairagis in these regions as elsewhere in India also accounts for India's cultural pluralism as a lived experience (not an academic discourse only!!)—the trademark of its special edition of secularism.

The second chapter, "Creating the deity: Women Sacrifice and the Goddess" focuses on the subversion of the classical/patriarchal forms of faith

at the grass-root level by a close reading of the practice of Devi-worship and man and woman sacrifice. In this connection, Sharma makes an interesting point: "The masculine sacrifice was viewed only as an offering to the god—the victim forgotten after the sacrifice. Opposed to this, woman was not only an ablation, but after the sacrifice, metamorphosis of the victim into a deity followed, and the place where the burial took place became the sacred center" (p.48). The sacrifice of the Chamba queen to bring forth water in the parched capital city has been celebrated, for example, in a number of folk-songs. Similarly, the popular legend of Boni Devi, who defied the might of Maharaja Ranjit Singh by immolating herself and was later on raised as Goddess of protest in popular imagination, also is a pointer toward the socio-political context of the popular belief in woman-sacrifice. The third chapter, "Subverting the Tradition: Ritual and Pollution as Forms of Protest" focuses on the unusual form of protest and subversion—the shamanic practice of lapsing into trance of an individual. Sharma recounts and interprets the story of a Brahmin girl of a village in Chamba district (in 1992) who had "illicit" relationship with a chamnar boy. On getting pregnant, she feigned "khelna" or trance that brought about the famous caste-conflict. Even in the little tradition of India, there are many examples of how the low-caste or the oppressed were possessed by a local deity in order to mobilize the popular

protest against exploitative authorities. Sharma's reading of Premchand's *Godan* (1936) in this connection is excellent as the Matadin-Silia (a Brahmin boy and a Chamar girl) affairs shows how the demon of caste-system can be destroyed. However, one finds it simplistic when he refers to Gandhi (in his endnotes) as defender of caste-system, keeping the hegemony of the Brahmins intact (pp. 93-94). This (mis) reading of Gandhi has been stereotyped in the academy. What is missed out here is the glaring fact that the post-1932 Gandhi, after having been chastened by Ambedkar, strongly advocated the abolition of caste-system. For example, in his famous article "Caste Has to Go" (*Harijan*, 16 Nov. 1935), he castigates the caste system and says that "the sooner public opinion abolishes it, the better."

In the fourth chapter, "Marginalisation And Appropriation: Hijacking The Popular Belief", he deals with the political economy of the institutionalized aspect of faith. He has collected ample data of grants and other patronizing donations made by the kings to the temples. He extends the scope of the subject in the next chapter, "Strategy of Dominance: Monastic Credit and Artisans". In the penultimate chapter, "Co-opting the Local: Indigenous Pilgrimage and Sub-continental Linkages" focuses on how pilgrim as a concept and process (that is pilgrimage) and pilgrim-site were manipulated by the power-structures to exploit the local. Sharma discusses the sacred and the secular epistemologies of "tirtha" and relates it to the political economy of the pilgrim-centers or sites. One can hardly ignore the significance of *tirtha yatras* in the context of imagining India's nationhood as its sacred geography often caused different people belonging to different regions come together and understand one

another, bringing about a sort of multiculturalist interface (which Gandhi called—*samas* in Hind Swaraj) that, even to this day, is the vital ingredient of India's nationhood—which defies the western positivistic notions of the nation based on the commonality of religion, race, language, ethnicity, history, culture and politics.

In the Epilogue, Sharma reinforces how the orthodox Brahmanism is subverted by the low-caste people in the hilly regions and how the sacred interfaces with the local economy. In fact, sometimes, the form of local economy decides the predominance of a particular deity or a devta in a region. Hence, the predominance of agricultural deities in Kangra, Mandi and Sirmaur regions and the importance of forest deities in the Chamba region. In this contexts, Sharma also underlines the significance of retelling or rupturing the dominant stories, myths or legends by the masses in order to register their dissent. Without pronouncing to belong to the elitist band of subaltern historians, Sharma has successfully marshaled all its wares *sans* its irritating western epistemology in his critical study of the realm of faith. Throughout his study, he is eclectic. One can easily understand the amount of field-work, data-collection, interviews, traveling, archival-work and several other inputs that have gone into the making of the book. What is even more important is Dr. Sharma's skill displayed in the task of sieving and sifting the source-material and fitting it into the interpretive grids. Obviously, everything is not the grist that comes to his mill! One may well read his book as a faithful rendering of the critique of faith from the point of view of the poor and the downtrodden. His study bears out the truth that the little tradition of faith, while drawing sustenance from the

great tradition, redefines and re-situates it. Hence, the negation of faith as a monolith. Hinduism, for whatever it means to its millions of believers, never prescribes a book of faith. Its non-prescriptive, open-ended, inclusivistic and self-critical nature makes it hospitable and friendly to all other faiths. It is only when the realm of faith is invaded by political, ideological or any other expediency, it degenerates into an existential or experiential crisis that results into its monstrous misconstruction and abuse. In a way, the distorted, hegemonic discourses of Faith eventually give rise to counter discourses of faith. What emerges as an afterthought, is the possibility and human desire of living in and by in the contesting (and often complementary) realms of pure, corrupted, and subverted faith in the Indian contexts. Gandhi, while affirming his faith in Hinduism, publicly defied the authority of all such Hindu scriptures (including the Vedas) as were violative of reason and morality. We had better view faith as an agent of spiritual growth rather than an instrument of (religious) power.

Equipped with rich documentation, appendices, glossary, a well-made bibliography and index, the book is a welcome addition to the interdisciplinary field of Cultural Studies. The work may be located in the tradition of Puran Chandra Joshi, Ramchand Guha and Chetan Singh – to name only a few contributors to this area of the Himalaya-studies. The Indian Institute of Advanced, ensconced in the lap of Himalayas, deserves credit for this production in a reasonably good shape and for the willingness to promote further studies in the problematic realm of faith.

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