Conversation with Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger

What has been your approach to the study of religion in South Asia?

I'm an ethnographer who listens to stories, and so perhaps telling my own story of how an ethnographer, with a Phd in South Asian Languages and Literatures, ended up in a department of religion thirty years ago is a good way into the questions you've asked about the field of the study of religion in South Asia generally and my own approach within it more specifically.

My BA is in English literature and I was initially trained to teach in higher secondary school. When I was given an unexpected opportunity to pursue an MA in South Asian Studies (at the University of Wisconsin in Madison), I thought I would go back to high school teaching. When I was in my first year of graduate school, I took a course that covered the development of Hindu traditions in premodern India through a textual history – you know, Vedas, Shastras, Puranas, Epics, Bhakti texts, etc. While so interesting, the approach left out most people and religious practices I had known and observed growing up in India. Then I took a course on "Indian Literature" taught by Velcheru Narayana Rao (who eventually became my PhD guide) that included women's oral Ramayana traditions, and I knew I had found the approach I wanted to pursue: oral traditions and ethnography. At the time, this approach was designated to anthropologists, while literary and religious studies were primarily limited to textual studies.

Once I set my mind to pursue a PhD, I had imagined I would pursue a career in Hindi language and literatures, knowing, however, that most of my teaching in this field would be outside of my chosen methodology of ethnography. Then in 1991, Emory University announced a position in ethnography and performance in its Religion Department; this was the first Religion Studies position to which I applied. It says something about the field of Religious Studies that no one with a PhD in religion applied for that position: at that time, students in Religious Studies were not being trained in ethnography and performance. Emory's was one of the first Religion Departments to hire an ethnographer, quickly followed by Syracuse University and Duke University, both of whom also hired ethnographers not formally trained in religion. Since that time, Emory's Religion Department has hired three more ethnographers and has trained many doctoral students in religion and ethnography.

How would you describe this ethnographic approach?

An ethnographic approach to religion is interested in specific ritual and everyday practices that are grounded in time and place – in what practitioners do, the kinds of decisions they make, their interpretations of narratives and rituals. It is descriptive of life worlds rather than prescriptive; so, for example, we look at what women do rather than what texts or male religious authority figures say they *should* do. One of my goals is to bring unwritten traditions into the mainstream of the study and teaching of religion, with a particular emphasis on their gendered performance and experience. I am particularly interested in indigenous (Indian-language) categories through which practitioners articulate and view their practices.

How did your textbook *Everyday Hinduism* (2015) come about?

I was asked by Wiley-Blackwell Publishers to propose a book on Hindu traditions for their textbook series on Everyday Religion. I first had to submit a book proposal that was sent to five outside evaluators, all professors of Hindu traditions. I proposed a thematic, ethnographic approach to Hindu traditions rather than a historical, textual one. All the evaluators wanted at least one

historical introductory chapter, but I held to my original plan, saying that there were plenty of historical/textual textbooks available and we really didn't need one more. In fact, many professors who use my book also use a historically oriented textbook alongside of it. *Everyday Hinduism* draws on my own ethnographic research and includes religious practices and narratives performed by Hindus from a wide range of backgrounds. Its chapter titles will give you an idea of topics covered: Families of Deities; Oral and Visual Narratives and Theologies; Loving and Serving God; Temples, Shrines, and Pilgrimage; Festivals; *Vrats*: Ritual Vows and Women's Auspiciousness; *Samskaras*: Transformative Rites of Passage; and Ritual Healing, Possession, and Astrology.

Tell us about your various monographs, spanning as they do a wide range of subjects, including of course religion, but going beyond, all path-breaking ethnographies of South Asian peoples and cultures.

The choice of research topic for each of my monographs has been rather serendipitous, but all fall within study of everyday practices and lives of non-elite communities, with a particular focus on gender. The topic for each book came up while I was pursuing another project and, for each, initially, I almost didn't think of pursuing it further!

I met the Muslim healer who is the focus of my second project (*In Amma's Healing Room: Gender & Vernacular Islam in South India,* 2006) when I was teaching a Ford Foundation workshop on ethnographic fieldwork methodologies in Hyderabad. Amma's own interpretation of why I ended up in her courtyard was: "I called you and you came." I was initially interested in how a woman had entered and continued to negotiate a professional role, as healer, usually occupied by men. But I also became interested in who came to Amma's healing room – Muslims, Hindus, and Christians – and how healing was effected across religious boundaries.

I met Tirupati's goddess Gangamma (*When the World Becomes Female*: *Possibilities of a South Indian Goddess,* 2013) when I was in Hyderabad and invited to join some fellow academic friends at Gangamma *jatara* for what I thought would be a one-time adventure. However, I returned several times for the festival and spent one full year of research in Tirupati. This book focuses on the female-centered world of Gangamma through analysis of her narratives, rituals, and the life stories of some of her devotees.

The seeds for *Material Acts in Everyday Hindu Worlds* were planted through my work at Emory's Michael C. Carlos Museum when I was asked to be an onsite curator for a traveling exhibit of Indian gold jewelry. In conjunction with the exhibit, I was asked to give a lecture on Indian wedding ornaments and in the intervening summer began to photograph *talis/mangalsutras* and listen to what women had to say about the significance of such ornaments. This expanded to a new project that considered through a performative and ethnographic lens a wider range of materialities and the ways in which they reflect and create an indigenous theory of material agency: ornaments, guises (*vesham*), turmeric-vermilion powders and other ritual substances, architecture, and cement images of Ravana. I begin this book with Indian ways of thinking about material agency (ornaments, turmeric-vermilion) and then shift to using this concept of agency as an analytic framework to look at other material forms about which my interlocutors may not be as explicit. My hope is that these case studies will encourage scholars of religion to notice materiality and think about the ways it shapes our worlds.

The project I am working on now – *Migration and Belonging on Mullingar Hill: Oral Histories of a Himalayan Hill Station* – took root when, several years ago, I returned for only a few days to my birth place, Mussoorie, and I noticed a new establishment in the bazaar, the Mussoorie Heritage Center. Heritage in this case, and often in narratives about Himalayan hill stations, focuses primarily on colonial heritage and its British and political actors. I found myself thinking: wait, the ancestors of many shopkeepers in the bazaar were also part of this story. I have returned to elicit oral histories of these ancestors and their current descendants, as well as more recently arrived families – stories of migration from both the north Indian plains and villages in the back mountains. I am also interested in stories and rituals through which these families have come to "belong" to Mussoorie.

I was born in Mussoorie and attended Woodstock School there from KG through twelfth standard; so in many ways, it is home. But through this project, I have come to know it in entirely new ways.

And Chhattisgarh, where your first monograph is based?

I spent my preschool years and thereafter school vacations in a village in Chhattisgarh where my parents were missionaries working in education and development. I returned to Chhattisgarh to conduct fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation, which became my first book (*Gender & Genre in the Folklore of Middle India*, 1996); so, on many levels, Chhattisgarh, too, is home. I came to the United States for college and have spent most of my adult life here – even as I have returned to India almost once a year. I am often asked by friends and acquaintances in India

which country I like better, India or the U.S. I learned early on that a response that captures my experience and is immediately understood by my interlocutors, often with a nod or laughter, and one that recognizes the possibility of multiple homes is: "India is my mother's place (*maika*) and America my in-laws' place (*sasural*)." Each place – and each research project, too – has shaped who I am and my approach to how I teach and write.

Getting back to methodologies: what kinds of dynamic does the vast spectrum of elite and non-elite religious beliefs and practices create in South Asia, and how might ethnography deal with this meaningfully?

An ethnographic perspective and methodology keeps us from making generalizations that may exclude certain communities and practices; it notices and accounts for difference. I often tell my students that the primary thing that I hope we learn together is to use adjectives when we make statements about religion or communities. Sometimes, it is the addition of a single word: for example, *some* Hindus perform *puja* every day at their home shrines; other times, specificity requires a longer explanation, a lecture or even a book. This kind of specificity, even as I identify some general trends, is reflected in the ethnographic approach I take in *Everyday Hinduism*.

Can you elucidate the significance of the analytics of "Performance" and "Materiality" in your ethnographic approach? At first glance, both appear to be somewhat "anti-ethnographic" concepts to me, the first suggesting that phenomena are less than ingenuous, and the second, that experience eventually gets fixed.

Such a good question. "Performance" in everyday English does have a connotation of something not quite "real;" or it can refer to something like a play or recitation of a poem. Performance Studies is something quite different and has multiple disciplinary lineages, including socio-linguistics, theatre studies, folklore and anthropology. Religious Studies came to it somewhat later.

I like to explain what performance means in this context through the (1960s) socio-linguistics model of Roman Jacobson. He uses the term the "performative" for statements that *cause something to happen*, to be distinguished from statements that describe what has happened or a particular situation. The example he uses is the statement made at the end of many Protestant weddings by the presiding officiant: "And now I declare you man and wife," or more recently the statement can be changed to be inclusive of non-heterosexual couples. It is this statement that changes the marital status of the couple: the statement is a "performative" that causes something to happen.

Religious Studies and other fields have expanded on this idea of *causing something to happen* to analysis of ritual and narrative, or even material, performance. Some scholars had earlier thought of ritual structurally, as *reflecting* particular social orders or identities, etc. Performance Studies, on the other hand, looks for what ritual may *create*, even as it also reflects. One can also think of Judith Butler's concept of the performativity of gender, where she argues that gender is not a pre-existing condition but is *created*.

Concurrent with this methodology is the assertion that every performance – a ritual, a recitation, telling of a story, donning of particular clothing – is emergent, is different than the performance prior or after it. A simple example from sociolinguistics would be the statement: "I'm hungry," which can have a range of meanings depending on the context in which it is made – a child not wanting to go to bed, a statement made by someone food-deprived, someone who is longing for connection, etc. So the statement itself has little inherent meaning and needs ethnographic context to know both what its performance is reflecting and creating.

Let's take the example of the Chhattisgarhi oral epic of Pandvani about which I have written. Every performance of the "same" story will be different, depending on who is performing, the audience, the setting, etc. When I attended a performance in an open-air courtyard in a Chhattisgarhi town, the audience was very interactive with the singer and prodded him to include certain episodes that he wanted to skip over in the interest of efficiency as the night was getting late. At one point singing about Damayanti's wedding, he simply concluded, "And so the women sang wedding songs." The women in the audience insisted that he perform the actual songs, not just report them; after all, they said, Damayanti would not be properly married without them. The performative negotiation both reflected *and* created a particular gendered world, and was itself a statement of the agency of performance. One can compare this performance to one that I attended in the US where the Pandvani singer was the well-known Ritu Varma. The setting was the auditorium at an American university; and most audience members were Indian or Indian-American, but did not understand the Chhattisgarhi in which Ritu Varma sang. Here, the performance did not create gender except in that the professional singer was female; rather, it created an "Indian" identity for a diasporic audience, a nostalgia for a life that audience members likely never actually experienced when they lived in India.

To reiterate: Performance Studies assumes that a ritual, a storytelling event, wearing particular clothing and ornaments, etc., *creates* rather than simply reflects a social order or identity, etc. Secondly, it assumes that each instance of the performance of a particular "genre" is unique and may create differently. The approach also looks at performative – narrative, ritual, sartorial, etc. – repertoires and wider social, political, and physical contexts of a given practice, asking: what else is this particular instance interacting with and being shaped by. In looking at the particular in everyday and ritual contexts, an ethnographic approach supports the assumptions and methodologies of Performance Studies.

Now to shift to the question about materiality; you have made a good observation about the potential of materiality "fixing" experience in place. Materiality is the "data" of study, not a method. There are many methods for the study of materiality, and my own is performative and ethnographic. That is, I want to bring materiality into the study of religion, but not as static objects; rather, I focus on materiality as *creative*, like ritual or narrative are assumed to be through a Performance Studies lens. I use the term "material agency" to talk about this creative potential. *What* these materials create depends on the particular contexts in which they are found, including other materials they are juxtaposed or interact with, what political theorist Jane Bennett calls "assemblages" of materials.

Perhaps it would be useful to give an example of how I approach materiality ethnographically and through Performance Studies: the large cement images of Ravana that are sprinkled in public spaces throughout the plains of Chhattisgarh. These images are not ritually tended to throughout the year except at Dasshera, when Ramlilas may be performed in front of them and *puja* performed to them. I argue, however, that there very *presence* throughout the year creates alternative possibilities to dominant narratives regarding Ravana, possibilities that human actors and communities may not have consciously intended when they built the permanent images. However, what these possibilities *are* shift according to which communities the images stand among and political and religious currents. In fact, the same image may have created a different alternative fifty years ago than it does today.

I conclude my book *Material Acts in Everyday Hindu Worlds* with a slight rewording of Bruno Latour's assertion that "To be accounted for, objects have to enter into accounts" (2005, 79). I write, "To account for objects as material actors will change our accounts – of religion itself."

What has been the significance of the question of gender in your studies.

One of my foci in my ethnographic study of religion has been on gender, in particular on women's experience and voices because these have been left out of so many archives and textual sources for the study of religion, as not being worthy of being taken into account. It is not likely that members of the South Indian families who have the tradition of women creating *kolam* every morning would discount their importance to the household – inviting the goddess, protecting, reflecting who is home and in what condition, etc. But if one were to ask the said families about their ritual lives, especially the men, they may leave this one out. To include women's traditions changes not only *what* and *how* we study but has the potential to change the parameters of what counts as religion itself. Gender does not, of course, mean only women. In my book on Gangamma *jatara* in Tirupati, I analyze *stri vesham* (female guising taken on by men) through a performative lens and conclude that wearing a sari in this ritual context – in the context of a fierce (*ugra*) goddess who destroys a sexually aggressive male – changes the masculinity of those who participate. I've come to think of gender as a religious category; that is, gender shapes the worlds we live in and gives it meaning, even as gender is shaped by those worlds.

After all these years of work, what is your understanding of religion in South Asia?

In the U.S., I (and many of my students) have often heard Hindus speaking English say, "Hinduism is not a religion; it is a way of life." In teaching, I use this assertion to question what the speakers mean by "religion" and where did they learn this definition. They often assume that "religion" in English implies institutional spaces and practices, rather than also domestic and everyday practices. In fact, most religious practitioners I know would also assert that their religious traditions – Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Afro-derived religions – are a way of life. It's interesting to think about how one would make the distinction between "religion" and "way of life" in an Indian language, since the term we use for "religion" is often *dharma*, which also means way of life. And so I ask my students in my classes to analytically think of religion as *dharma*, whose literal meaning, drawing from the Sanskrit root *dhr,* is: what holds the world together, what shapes the physical and social world (and our experience of it). This term lets us move easily beyond theology or "worship" or deities, to include gender, family structures,

agricultural practices, architecture, ornaments, food, etc., as "religion."

Another important aspect of religion in South Asia that I have learned through my research and living in India is the fluidity and shared cultural bases of *some* religious practices and boundaries, even as others are more firmly drawn – and when one looks for shared cosmologies, narrative and ritual grammars, one can find these shared between traditions outside of India as well. This is one of the foci of *In Amma's Healing Room*. I look for what ritual practices, narratives, and worldviews cross religious boundaries *at this healing place*, what I call a "crossroads/ *caurasta*." Of course, many of you will know and argue that this is changing in contemporary India; but I still find these shared experiences, practices, and knowledge in many places and see them as constructive resources for mutual acceptance.

(In conversation with Aditya Pratap Deo)