



Religions and Development Research Programme

Religion, wellbeing and development in India

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The primary goal of human development is to improve wellbeing for all, especially the poor, although views differ on how to define and achieve this aim. In development studies and policy, there are three key expectations of religion: it is seen as a form of social identity; a source of community and social welfare; and a source of values and authority. This research uses these three areas to explore the relationships between religion, wellbeing and development in contemporary India.

Religion provides an important basis for ideas about wellbeing, specifying through teaching and practice what it means to live well, as an individual and as a community. It is also widely understood as a source of wellbeing for its adherents, providing comfort in times of trouble, offering a framework of meaning to make sense of life's vicissitudes, and providing a community that gives social support and confers identity through a sense of belonging.

India's complex history and recent economic, social and political changes, especially since the government's shift in 1991 from an economic model inspired by state socialism to one of far reaching liberalization, are likely to have implications for the ways people live their religion and how they understand and seek to achieve economic and social advancement and wellbeing.

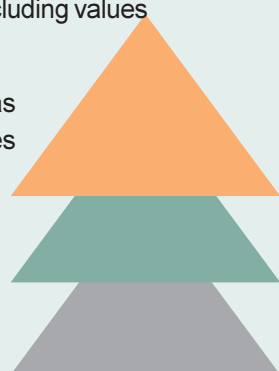
A mixed qualitative and quantitative field study was conducted in two urban and two rural sites in two states, Punjab and Orissa. The fieldwork was carried out over eight months in 2008-2009 by a team of researchers from the University of Bath, with the assistance of two local NGOs.

In India, the British colonial government's desire to understand and quantify religion led to the codification of religious traditions that had previously been less clearly defined and differentiated. Religion has historically been an important factor in people's ability to achieve social

advancement, because of the association between Hinduism and caste, and changing relationships between the state and different religious traditions.

Findings from the research show how expectations of religion in the development literature are problematic:

- While all the respondents acknowledged that religion is important in their lives, its importance should not be exaggerated. It is easy to attribute to religion something that may actually be better explained by other factors such as levels of prosperity, location or caste.
- Identities and affiliations are much less fixed than the literature often implies.
- Religion is certainly significant to wellbeing, but primarily as a grounding for the moral order on which society is based and individuals act or behave. It can also be significant in personal piety and meaning-making.
- Ideas of wellbeing are essentially social, focussed on the family and community.
- Wellbeing is also gendered. Women's fulfilment in particular is constructed as embedded in the wellbeing of their families.
- In the wider quality of life literature, satisfaction is related to reducing the gap between aspirations and attainment, but this study reveals a different view, in which a primary social value lies in being satisfied with what one has.
- The family emerges as most important for the provision of welfare and the teaching of values – including values associated with religion.
- Religious institutions are seen primarily as places of worship, and religious authorities (like political ones) are often held in scant regard.



- The expectations of religion in development studies and policy fit best with the experience of adherents of Christianity, then Islam, less well with Sikhism, and least with Hinduism. In part this may be due to the differing character of the religious traditions, and in part to the forms each tradition takes in the particular context of South Asia. It may also be because the roots of development studies and practice are in modern Euro-American Christianity, from which the narrow notion of 'religion' itself is derived.
- Religion is associated with an underlying moral order, while development policies and programmes are only a small part of most people's lives. The development sector therefore should be modest in its claims and aims.
- Development actors should listen carefully to what is being said when religious references are used, not projecting their own assumptions onto unfamiliar contexts or jumping to quick conclusions
- Judgements by development agencies about religious organizations should be based on their character and work, with their religious identity considered only if it impacts on wider development goals, for example by encouraging or discouraging social inclusion.

Implications of the findings for policy and practice include:

- Religion in both urban and rural India is very much a part of everyday life, which needs to be respected.

Based on Sarah C. White, Joe Devine, Shreya Jha and Stanley Gaines (2010) *Religion, Development and Wellbeing in India*. Birmingham: Religions and Development WP 54.

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