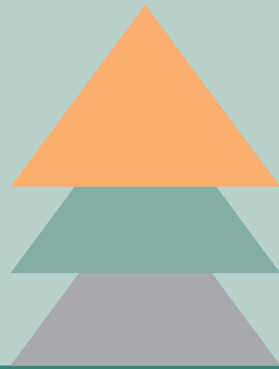# Religions and Development
Research Programme

Well-being and Religion in India: A Preliminary Literature Review

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Religions and Development

Research Programme

The Religions and Development Research Programme Consortium is an international research partnership that is exploring the relationships between several major world religions, development in low-income countries and poverty reduction. The programme is comprised of a series of comparative research projects that are addressing the following questions:

- How do religious values and beliefs drive the actions and interactions of individuals and faith-based organisations?
- How do religious values and beliefs and religious organisations influence the relationships between states and societies?
- In what ways do faith communities interact with development actors and what are the outcomes with respect to the achievement of development goals?

The research aims to provide knowledge and tools to enable dialogue between development partners and contribute to the achievement of development goals. We believe that our role as researchers is not to make judgements about the truth or desirability of particular values or beliefs, nor is it to urge a greater or lesser role for religion in achieving development objectives. Instead, our aim is to produce systematic and reliable knowledge and better understanding of the social world.

The research focuses on four countries (India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania), enabling the research team to study most of the major world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and African traditional belief systems. The research projects will compare two or more of the focus countries, regions within the countries, different religious traditions and selected development activities and policies.

The consortium consists of six research partner organisations, each of which is working with other researchers in the four focus countries:

- University of Birmingham, UK: International Development Department, Department of Theology and Religion, Centre for West African Studies, Centre for the Study of Global Ethics.
- University of Bath, UK: Centre for Development Studies.
- Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi.
- Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, Ibadan.
- University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan.

In addition to the research partners, links have been forged with non-academic and non-government bodies, including Islamic Relief.

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Contents

Key words: Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, gender

Summary

Contemporary ideas about religion and its role in Indian society are rooted in the country's pre-colonial history, the interpretations and actions of the colonial government, and the post-colonial evolution of Indian society and the state. Most academic attention within India has been given to religion as communal identity, to such an extent that the terms 'community' and 'communalism' have largely been understood in religious terms, resulting in a view of religion that is divisive and a source of conflict. Religion has also been seen as an impediment to modernization and an obstacle to the formation of a secular state (a state that is equidistant from all religions). The pursuit of secularism in the political sphere fails to recognize that the vast majority of people in South Asia are active practitioners of a religion and that the religious traditions with which they are affiliated encompass the entirety of their lives and are a key source of values and meanings, with the result that for them the public and private spheres are intertwined.

This review was undertaken in preparation for a study of how well-being is understood by poor people associated with different religions in India, the roles religion plays in their conceptions of well-being, the resources on which well-being depends and the processes by which it is increased or undermined. The review conceptualizes religion as a source of identity, community and values but notes that the existing literature does not make the links between religion and well-being explicit.

First, the role of religion in people's sense of identity and how this configures their changing relationships with wider social groups and the state is discussed. The paper notes that, although religious identity has become more fixed since the beginning of the colonial period, it (like caste) is less immutable than it appears, as demonstrated by the emergence of new religious practices and conversions of people from disadvantaged groups. Existing research demonstrates the complexity and dynamism of the links between religion, caste and access to resources.

Second, the role of religion in the construction of community is examined: who belongs, what processes determine this, when and where do religious boundaries become more rigid or loosen, and how does this impact on people? The review shows that religious identity is often important, but is neither rigid nor necessarily the most important source of people's identity. Even where inter-religious conflict occurs, people maintain social relationships with their peers from other religious traditions, and

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many, for example healers, borrow ideas and practices from other religions. Moreover, caste and gender are important sources of identity, reinforcing social inequality despite ostensible religious commitment to equality. Some examples of mobilization by marginalized groups, especially women, to claim space and status within religious traditions are reviewed.

Research that considers how people perceive and draw on religion as a source of meaning and values in their lives is also reviewed, showing that, although religion is only one source of values, it can be an important motivation for individuals and shared religious beliefs and practices can generate trust and solidarity between people interacting in social groups and neighbourhoods.

Finally, threads from the discussions are brought together to consider how religion has been implicated in processes of social change, what this has meant for the values that people hold dear, and how this has in turn transformed religious practice. Religion is connected in many ways to different strands of change, for example through conversion, the ways that boundaries between religions crystallize or loosen, and the ways in which people subscribe to or shed their religious identities. Such changes in turn variously reinforce, challenge or create new meanings for religious practice. A brief conclusion notes the risks and limitations of such a preliminary attempt to identify the links between the ideas of well-being and religion, which are themselves complex concepts.

1   Introduction

The role of religion in processes of development and modernization in the global south has not been systematically analysed, partly because there has been a tendency in development discourse to privilege economics. Although economic analyses and models of development have been complemented since the 1970s and 1980s by attention to politics and the state, gender and later culture (in India also caste), even these shifts failed to recognize the importance of religion in people's lives. This stemmed in part from the assumption that, with the advance of modernity and modernization, religion would naturally recede into the background because it stands in opposition to modern scientific knowledge and is a hurdle to development.

In spite of its neglect in development studies, religion has never been far from the public sphere in India. Although formally a secular state, India is not only a country of many religions but also one where religion is deeply intertwined with the manner in which people go about living their lives and in the way the country was formed at independence. Thus it seems particularly difficult not to touch on religion when talking about the nature of social, political and economic change in India. It seems surprising, therefore, that the social sciences in India have tended to stay away from the study of religion, in contrast to the extensive study of caste, for instance. Where religion has been examined, this has happened in particular ways, with religion as communal identity being the primary focus of concern, to such an extent that the terms 'community' and 'communalism' have largely been understood in religious terms (Searle-Chatterjee, 2003). This has tended to produce a view of religion as a source of identity and values that is sharply divisive and a source of conflict (Jodhka, 2008; Searle-Chatterjee, 2003).

Religion has also been seen as an impediment to modernization and an obstacle to the formation of a secular state, which has further limited the ways in which it has been studied. As a result, it is hardly talked of without reference to the idea of secularism, although there are critiques of this positioning of religion. Madan (1987), for example, is notable for his criticism of the manner in which secularism has assumed ascendance in Indian public life and in theorizing regarding it. In his view, the secularism that is peculiar to India[1] and finds mention in the Constitution (equidistance between the state and all religions) fails to recognize that the vast majority of people in South Asia are active practitioners of a religion and that the religious traditions with which they are affiliated encompass the entirety of their lives and are a key source of values and meanings. As a result, he suggests, it is virtually impossible

to separate the public and private spheres. A division between religious and secular is, in his view, inappropriate in the Indian context. Moreover, if modernity is defined as secular, it tends to be viewed as antithetical to religion. However, in his view this is a mistake because it restricts the way in which both religion and modernity are viewed and understood. Madan also suggests that it is impossible for the state to remain equidistant from and honour equally all religions. He points out that this view of religion and secularism stems from the European Enlightenment and has heavily influenced not only politics and society but also the evolution of the social sciences in India and beyond (see also Bradley, 2007; Rakodi, 2007; Tomalin, 2007).

In India, a critique of religion and its substitution by scientific rational thought has been the preserve of elite groups since the colonial period, with the result that a secular view of modernity evolved, which has been largely imposed from the top down. The colonial project is an important starting point for understanding religion as it exists today in South Asia (van der Veer, 2002). It was the colonial project's attempt to understand social groups and characteristics that led to the initial categorization of religions in India, through the colonial government's census operations (see also Searle-Chatterjee, 2003). This, combined with the strict secularity of the colonial state, ironically left the space open for religion to enter the public sphere, first through the work of Christian missionaries and later, as a reaction to this, through Hindu and Islamic reformist movements (van der Veer, 2002). These movements attempted to return to perceived 'pure' versions of the religions, with the result that the colonial policy of non-interference in religious matters resulted in a changed form of religion, in which both Hinduism and Islam attempted to present themselves in 'modern' form, resulting in the establishment of schools, universities and other public institutions for this purpose (van der Veer, 2001). The outcome was to situate religion very much in the public sphere. This background provides a starting point for assessing how thinking about religion has evolved in India.

This review was undertaken in preparation for a study of how well-being is understood by poor people associated with different religions in India, the roles religion plays in their conceptions of well-being, the resources on which well-being depends and the processes by which it is increased or undermined (White et al, 2011). The paper therefore seeks to examine various aspects of lived religion to inform the main study and frame its analysis of the role of religion in social change. First, the relationships between well-being and religion revealed by existing sources are briefly discussed, in order to provide

a framework for the remainder of the review. The main part of the paper then focuses on various dimensions of religion, conceptualizing it as a source of identity, community and values. The first section looks at the role of religion in people's sense of identity and how this configures their relationships with wider social groups and the state. The second the role of religion in the construction of community: who belongs, what processes determine this, when and where do religious boundaries rigidify or loosen, and how does this impact on people? The final section examines how people perceive and draw on religion as a source of meaning and values in their lives. Finally, threads from these discussions are brought together to consider how religion has been implicated in processes of social change, what this has meant for the values that people hold dear, and how this has in turn transformed religious practice. A brief conclusion notes the risks and limitations of such a preliminary attempt to identify the links between the ideas of well-being and religion, which are themselves complex concepts.

2   Well-being and religion

As scholars have pointed out, in South Asia the public and private are not strictly divided and religion is an all-encompassing experience for many people. A compartmentalization of life into the public and private spheres accompanies modernity, with religion falling squarely in the private realm. However, religion and the everyday aspects of material and social life that are critical to people's well-being are deeply intertwined, whether these connections are obvious or subtle.

In India, the links have taken various forms. As mentioned earlier, religion evolved in response to the political economy of the colonial state, resulting in both Hinduism and Islam reinventing themselves in modern forms. For both religions, part of this process was the establishment of educational institutions that enabled members of their respective communities to compete for the new opportunities that the colonial administration presented, and for which it was promoting secular education. These developments resulted in the creation of a modern elite. Religion was also intimately connected with access to resources and livelihoods, themselves influenced by colonial developments. Changes in livelihoods in turn changed social and spatial relationships. If these had religious dimensions, mobilization along religious lines sometimes followed.

A body of work on lived religion describes it as the foundation of well-being, as reflected in ideas about religious values and the welfare of individuals, families and communities. For instance, one factor in a family's choice of residence may be the belief that a religious atmosphere, in which the values imparted by religion can be inculcated in young children, can reduce the likelihood that they will be led astray by a consumerist culture (Jasani, 2008; Kirmani, 2008a). The key role of family in social relationships and imparting values is also obvious in Sarkar's discussions of the family ties in Hindutva politics, particularly with respect to the role of the women's wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Rashtrasevika Samiti. The activities of the latter organisation are chiefly concerned with the inculcation of values within the family. In fact the organizations associated with the RSS are referred to as a 'family' of organizations, implying that relationships among members can be strengthened by ordering them in the manner of kinship relations (Sarkar, 2002).

In contrast, religion may also be relevant to well-being if it challenges the status quo. Well-being is inherently about politics, since power influences whether and how people are able to access resources (White, 2009). In practice, 'community well-being' may describe the well-being of only a few

dominant groups. Religion has often been a site where the status quo has been challenged and conversion to a faith that professes the equality of all has posed challenges to the dominant faith or group. In India, this has been visible in the mass conversion of lower caste and untouchable Hindu communities to Islam, Christianity, Sikhism or Neo-Buddhism. As Robinson (2003) points out, over fifty per cent of Indian Christians are drawn from the formerly untouchable castes, and Searle-Chatterjee (2003) notes the relatively large proportions of poor and formerly low caste or untouchable groups amongst Muslims in Uttar Pradesh. Religion may therefore provide an idiom for contesting dominant power relationships, whether or not such challenges bring about the anticipated transformation in material, social and individual well-being.

However, while the examples given above show how religion seems to be pertinent to well-being, the literature on religion does not make such links explicit. One difficulty is that both well-being and religion are complex. Religion is not just about identity, community or values, it is about all three simultaneously, in ways that do not allow the different aspects to be separated into convenient categories. Thus when talking about religion as identity, it is difficult to separate identity from the idea of community or from religion as a source of values and meaning in people's lives.

3 Religion as identity

Religion is just one of a number of identities that people have or choose to have. Searle-Chatterjee (2003) points out that religious identity has often been thought of as unchangeable and immutable, much in the manner of caste. However, this is not the case: not only does religious identification constantly shift, it shifts in conjunction with other factors, such as caste and class. As noted above, much of the literature on religion as identity in India has been associated with communalism, which has in turn been associated with rivalry and conflict. Other views on the role of religion in identity appear in discussions regarding caste and gender, some of which are discussed here. It is clear not only that identity cannot be rooted in religion alone, but also that caste, class and religion tend to coincide. If identity is linked to access to resources, it may result in multiple sources of privilege or deprivation (Searle-Chatterjee, 2003). In addition to religion, other categories of identity crystallized during the colonial period as a result of parallel processes. As well as religion, caste categories were defined as part of the colonial census operations, encouraging both to become more fixed and immutable identities than they had previously been (Freitag, 1980). For this reason it is useful to briefly describe how these categories and identities were implicated in material processes during the colonial period and how these have subsequently set the ground for the way in which religion has continued to evolve.

Gooptu (1996), in her work on urban poverty in early twentieth century North India, aims to show how religion was implicated in material and social processes. The context of her writing is the expansion of urban, administrative centres with the consolidation of colonial rule in North India. This was accompanied by extensive migration of impoverished untouchable and touchable low caste people to these urban centres in search of new kinds of employment. Both high and low caste groups' experience of the caste system changed as a result. The untouchable castes ceased to be merely servants of the upper castes; rather they acquired the status of paid labour. However the nature of their work, often as sanitation workers in municipal bodies, reinforced their ritually unclean status. The touchable low castes were mostly employed as unskilled manual labour, often in a temporary and unpredictable capacity, which served to reinforce their dependence on upper caste merchants and moneylenders in client-patron relationships. Because of the view that these groups of people were unclean, they were forced to live in segregated areas on the peripheries of the towns, just as in the villages, limiting their access to both public resources and new kinds of employment. At the same time, low caste people recognized their subordinate position vis-à-vis the upper castes and started to seek ways of challenging these power relations.

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The untouchable groups turned to Bhakti devotion, which emphasized the direct relationship between a devotee and his or her God, de-emphasized caste identity and thus did away with the ritual role of Brahmin priests, for instance. They also started to refer to themselves as Adi-Hindu, literally meaning the original inhabitants of the subcontinent. A corollary to this concept was the notion that the conquering Aryans had imposed caste as a weapon of subjugation, so as to deny the original inhabitants their claims to land and other material resources. These groups thus attempted to position themselves outside the Hindu tradition, mobilizing both religion and their caste identity to express their rights, in order to challenge their marginalization in material and social life (see also Gooptu, 1997).

Gooptu goes on to contrast this with the manner in which the touchable low castes challenged their economic and material marginalization, also using a religious idiom but expressed in a slightly different manner. These groups had more involvement with the newly powerful mercantile classes through their economic relationships. Recognizing that outward displays of piety and religiosity had become symbols of power and authority for the mercantile classes, especially through the public performance of religious festivals such as the Ramlila during Dussehra, members of the lower touchable castes started to participate more actively in these processions and performances. Their increased participation in the Ramlila allowed them to identify with the god Ram, who epitomizes the qualities of a warrior. While their early participation was passive, they began to chant martial slogans to promote their identification with Ram's *kshatriya* (warrior caste) army, drawing on folklore that valorized them as protectors of the gods and local heroes. At the same time, this identification was a symbol of their physical strength, also shown through the kind of labour in which they were involved. Through these narratives, they started to portray themselves as warriors, indicating a desire to climb up the caste ladder. This was not, of course, merely a symbolic gesture. Because the Ramlila performances had become not only outward shows of piety but also expressions of power in which merchant groups vied to outdo each other, the touchable low caste groups that mobilized for each performance used them to reinforce their group identity in order to secure themselves against similar groups competing for the same scarce resources of livelihoods, land, housing, and the patronage of richer merchants (Gooptu, 1997). Participation in such religious performances was accompanied by a number of other activities. For example, during this period, *akharas* or centres of martial training emerged in great numbers. Traditionally, various sects of ascetics had run such centres to protect their faith. In the nineteenth century they started to attract lower caste migrants in large numbers. The latter saw such centres as

important, not only to project their piety, but also to guard their turf from upper caste exploitation, strict policing by the lower rungs of the colonial administration[2] and the equally large Muslim migrant population. Another way that these groups chose to protect their resources, especially urban land, was by erecting roadside shrines and temples, followed by claims that the land they occupied was holy or sanctified and therefore could not be usurped by others, whether upper class groups, Muslims or the administration. This was justified by the idea, contributed by more literate and upwardly mobile people within the same castes, that what was rightfully theirs had been taken away, first by the Mughal administration and then by the British. The notion of protecting what was theirs was therefore a particularly appealing one (Gooptu, 1997).

The preceding discussion highlights the way in which religious identity becomes more important when changes in social and material processes occur. This, according to Searle-Chatterjee (2003), was more marked in the areas administered directly by the British than in the princely states, where traditional structures remained more intact. It also had an impact on the relations between different religious groups. In north India, relationships between Hindus and Muslims were influenced most strongly. As noted earlier, Hindu and Muslim identities had already started to crystallize, although this does not mean that the two religious groups were homogeneous. For example, in describing violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims in eastern Uttar Pradesh in the late 1800s, Searle-Chatterjee notes that while Muslims were attacked during Eid by upper caste Hindu landlords and lower touchable castes alike, this was not so much an expression of religious intolerance as an attempt to retain control of their power base (in the case of the landlords) and to gain a more visible Hindu status and image (in the case of the lower touchable castes).

Other examples of conflict between Hindus and Muslims also need to be seen as more than just religious conflicts. In Uttar Pradesh, for example, there were large groups of Muslim craftsmen and artisans, many of whom had been impoverished by the colonial economy, meaning that a large proportion of the urban poor were Muslim. In contrast, much of the trading and small-scale manufacturing was controlled by the Hindu merchant classes, who were able to benefit from the expansion of the colonial economy (Gooptu, 1996, 1997). Because of the unstable nature of their employment, poor Muslims were dependent on the Hindu mercantile classes for loans. As a result, they were often trapped in exploitative relationships that maintained them in poverty. Thus it was hardly

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surprising when attacks on the Hindu merchant classes occurred (Searle-Chatterjee, 2003). However, lower caste Hindu groups joined in these riots, often fighting against Hindu upper caste groups, turning the idea that the conflicts were inter-religious on its head.

Nevertheless, conflicts occurred, not only between Hindus and Muslims, but also between other groups, notably between Hindus and Christians. For example, C.J Arun (2007), writes how the untouchable Paraiyar community in a village of Tamil Nadu converted to Christianity after a land conflict with the local upper caste landlords in 1941. Despite their conversion, however, they continued to be entangled in exploitative client-patron relationships, which resulted from their ritual subservience as well as a struggle over the control of material resources, particularly land. Paraiyars had been ritual drummers, performing at upper caste festivals such as those venerating the Goddess Mariamman[3]; at Pongal; and at upper caste funerals. The ritual drumming is significant because it is believed to drive away evil spirits and, during funerals, the traditional calf-skin drum itself is also believed to keep the evil spirits - awakened by the death - at bay. Arun describes how, in spite of having converted to Christianity, the Paraiyars' collective identity was so intimately tied up with ritual drumming that they found it difficult to give up this activity. Simultaneously, however, they gradually became conscious of their new identity, which symbolized a way of escaping the indignity resulting from the polluting ritual performance.[4] Thus, following their conversion, the Paraiyars began to seek an appropriate opportunity to end their ritual subservience to the upper castes. This arose during the Pongal festival in 1996, when the upper caste landlords attempted to reassert their rights over the land that they believed had been usurped by the Paraiyars. The Paraiyars opposed this move, resulting in a fight, which led to both groups filing police complaints; the land was thereafter notified as disputed and both groups were denied access to it (Arun, 2007, p 92-93). The Paraiyars subsequently stopped drumming for the upper caste groups, thereby removing themselves from their ritual domination. Arun further goes on to point out that the Paraiyars had to some extent sought both this conflict and previous ones, in order to extricate themselves from their traditionally subservient position in the village. He sees this in itself as an expression of their new-found identity, as they would not have attempted to assert themselves in this manner had they remained within the Hindu tradition. Here too the axes of conflict cannot be simply reduced to religion, as a matter of Hindus versus Christians, but have to be seen in the context of earlier and enduring caste relationships. There were successive phases and events following the Paraiyar conversion to Christianity, which wrested control from the

upper castes little by little. This is indicative of how tensions between these groups was articulated not only with religion but also with earlier, and enduring, caste and class relations and not least with competition over material resources.

However, conversion to a religion that ostensibly claims the equality of all people does not necessarily overcome social inequalities. Within Christianity, for example, a number of groups remained economically and socially marginalized (Robinson, 2003). As a result of the uneven attitude of the churches to the pre-existing caste hierarchy, converts from untouchable or lower castes have not necessarily been able to secure better access to resources after conversion, because they continue to have the same occupations. Pulayas and Paraya in Kerala, for instance, continue to be landless labourers for upper caste Hindu and Syrian Christian landlords. The case of the fishing communities in southern districts of Tamil Nadu, the Paravars and the Mukkuvars, is no different. They were separate from a strongly agrarian-based society and caste system that viewed them as outside the fold. Robinson (2003) suggests that, rather than acquiesce in this view of themselves, conversion offered them a means to escape caste discrimination. However, although they converted as early as the sixteenth century, they did not automatically gain access to the cultural and social capital of (formerly) upper caste Christians, who also looked down upon them and from whom they continued to be separated. Their conversion only reinforced their distinctiveness (Ram, 1992). As Ram (1992) describes it, this is most visible in the rituals surrounding fishing expeditions, when they invoke not just Mary (referred to as Mataa – mother - in the manner of Hindu goddesses), but also non-Sanskritic local Hindu goddesses, who are said to bestow good fortune on them. They thus appropriate and propitiate whatever deity they regard as necessary to secure their material well-being.

Fernando, Macwan and Ranganathan (2004) too talk about conversion as one way of attempting to radically alter the received social order. They examine the experience through retelling the story of one convert in early post-Independence India (p 122); however, the broader context of this narrative emerges from Christian missionary activity, both Catholic and Protestant, in the colonial period. Their narrative, which emerges from Gujarat, suggests that the ambiguity of the Catholic Church on the question of caste served to partially break down former social relationships while immersing converts in a confusing situation of professed equality, which was contradicted by the actual inequality of lived experience. This resulted in what the authors refer to as a "number of social inconsistencies" (p 119).

The first of these was the continued discrimination against various converted groups, to such an extent that some have even returned to the Hindu fold. The second refers to the converts' movement from one type of socially discriminatory system to another equally entrenched hierarchy marked by the distinction between clergy and laity. What the narrative captures in great detail is the sense of being uprooted to which the process of conversion led. While on the one hand, converts' relationships with their broader caste or sub-caste community were transformed by their conversion, on the other, they did not experience a sense of becoming part of a larger (Catholic or Protestant) Christian community. It appears that this was reinforced for subsequent generations of converts because they did not even have their original community traditions to fall back on and by the question of whether Dalit Christians should be beneficiaries of the reservation system. In its later acknowledgement of the need for reservation for Dalit Christian groups, the authors suggest that the Church had tacitly accepted its failure to offer an equitable social alternative to the caste system which, for all its discrimination, may have provided some social support to the communities that had converted (Fernando et al, 2004, p 141). As the authors suggest, religion in this instance failed to coalesce with the social well-being of all parts of the convert community (p 140).

Christianity and Islam are not the only religions to have attracted converts because they profess equality for all people. Sikhism too has attracted a strong following from amongst the low and formerly untouchable castes in Punjab, the state with the highest proportion of what are now called scheduled castes. Nevertheless, although the caste hierarchy is thought to have been less rigid in Punjab due to the absence of a strong Sanskritic/ Brahmanical tradition and the influence of Sikh and Muslim teachings, caste divisions have not vanished altogether. As in other parts of the country, caste identities have carried over into these religions and, as Jodhka (2002) highlights, where a caste straddles two religions, marrying within the caste can take precedence over marrying within the religion. Although it would appear, at least on the surface, that low caste and untouchable converts to Sikhism have been able to overcome a great deal of the stigma surrounding their ritual status, they continue to report feeling discriminated against.[5] How does this translate into relations of material life? It would appear that various processes have gradually loosened the connection between caste and occupation. This is partly attributable to increasing mobility and migration away from the villages. Where possible, landless labourers have ceased to work for the dominant landowning castes, who are primarily Sikhs, so as to loosen the ties of servitude by which they were traditionally bound. Other

service castes have also recast the manner of their service provision by setting these up as small-scale commercial activities. Where people continue in traditional occupations, they often choose to work in neighbouring villages rather than in their own (Jodhka, 2002). However, some government housing schemes for Dalits have had the effect of reinforcing their separation from the dominant castes by situating such developments away from the older parts of villages, so that these groups continue to use separate resources, for instance sources of water (ibid).

Following from the previous point, housing developments and how they are situated seem particularly relevant to a discussion of how identities can impact access to resources. Fernando et al (2004), Simpson (2004) and Jasani (2008) talk about the situation of settlements in the context of Gujarat. Fernando et al examine the process of conversion, the subsequent divergence between the religious and social orders, and how this impacts on the social lives of groups that have been converted (see below). Simpson discusses the reconstruction following the devastating earthquake of 2001 and how this reflected and sometimes reinforced relationships between various communities, and Jasani discusses similar developments in the context of reconstruction and service provision following the Hindu-Muslim clashes in 2002 (see below).

Fernando et al (2004) discuss tribal and Dalit groups' conversion to Christianity and how different churches approached the question of caste in distinct ways. The Protestant church has always held that conversion must completely extract individuals from their previous caste relationships through a process of complete disassociation from members of their former caste group. In order to facilitate this process, the churches encouraged the creation of exclusively Protestant rural settlements, where members of formerly different communities lived together as Protestant Christians, thus forging new social relationships, for instance through marriage, and completely obliterating their former caste identities. This contrasted with the traditional Hindu caste system, which demanded that a bride/groom be selected from a village at a certain specified distance in order to adhere to the rules of marriage. Not only was this no longer required for Protestant converts, but also there was no need to take account of caste affiliation in the selection of a marriage partner. This was in stark contrast with the manner in which the Catholic Church approached the question of caste, as discussed above.

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In talking about the post-earthquake reconstruction, Simpson (2004) describes a social climate of hardening community identities, which derives much of its impetus from the strong Hindutva agenda that marks Gujarat's political stage. This agenda provided a convenient framework for the reconstruction process, with many of the organizations, planners and social workers involved drawing upon its vision and ideals. Simpson places the new housing settlements established in the aftermath of the earthquake within a larger tendency for the Hindutva political parties to map the myths and events of Hindu religious traditions, derived from texts such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, onto real physical places, thereby ascribing meaning by invoking the symbolism of good versus evil. In the Gujarat context Muslims form a convenient 'other', since they can be identified as invaders and usurpers of what is said to rightfully belong to Hindus. Muslims and Dalit Hindus have deliberately either been left out of resettlement projects altogether or, where they have been accommodated, they have been relegated to the margins, segregated from the dominant communities by roads and by poorer quality construction, much as they had been traditionally. These new villages reflect a particular view of society and the value ascribed to each group. Simpson points out that the temple or spiritual centre forms an important hub, reflecting the dominant ideology of the group that funded the construction of a settlement, and often subordinating the local deity by superimposing its god. Most importantly, since many of the new villages are designed around community resources such as schools and health centres, the physical layout helps to ensure that access to these resources is enabled or constrained by identity. Not only do these settlements highlight Hindu-Muslim relationships, they also illustrate the tension between the idea of a unified Hindu identity and a community divided along caste lines.

While the preceding example talked of both inter- and intra-religious identities, Jasani (2008) describes competing Muslim identities in Ahmedabad in the aftermath of the riots in 2002, when a number of Muslim - mainly reformist - organizations provided relief and built housing colonies for the victims of the riots. As in the post-earthquake reconstruction, various *jamaats* competed for the loyalty of the community. Loyalty was rewarded with a new home, although it was claimed that other resources, such as community centres, vocational training centres and mosques, would provide focal points around which a strong sense of community could emerge. Some of the organizations involved claimed that the community had suffered the trauma as divine retribution for having turned away from the correct path to God, thus insinuating their own places in communities' lives and taking on the task

of ensuring that individuals conform to a prescribed moral standard. The creation of community in the new housing colonies constructed by such religious organizations was therefore mediated through the provision of resources, with the result that identifying with the (correct) Muslim identity was a conscious strategy on the part of individuals to access the scarce resources that were available (Jasani, 2006).

Säävalä's research in Andhra Pradesh seeks to understand the religious strategies that lower castes adopt in order to buttress their identity when they become new entrants to the middle classes (Säävalä, 2001). She distinguishes such strategies from the strategies of Sanskritization that had earlier been adopted in order to achieve caste mobility. In Andhra Pradesh, she asserts, new entrants to the middle class adopt particular rituals, although it is not merely the adoption of the rituals but their public performance that is important, particularly the ability to manipulate 'auspiciousness'[6] to suit their needs. Thus one member of the family that Säävalä uses as a case study claims that the performance of the *puja* at their home "…makes things happen" (ibid, p 312). Säävalä puts this in context by describing the family as facing numerous difficulties. For instance it is a family with three daughters and no sons, so that dowry is a problem, resulting in none of the daughters being married although the eldest was 28 years old at the time of the study. In addition, the father had lost family wealth such as land in disputes with his brothers. Hence the performance of the *puja* with everyone watching was regarded as important, not only to propitiate the gods but also to secure recognition as a middle class family, which it was hoped would enable them to find grooms from better off families. Säävalä also describes the family as somewhere in between its original lower class/ caste roots and the middle class identity to which it aspires, and with prickly relations with various relatives, some of whom are worse off and are described as envious and some who are better off and do not like to be seen associating with them. A *puja* therefore becomes an occasion which allows the family to associate with their relatives while averting or negating the evil eye (or even redirecting it as a positive gaze) or the bad luck associated with such relationships, and also plays a role in sorting out other issues, such as the share of ancestral wealth which is crucial to the family's middle class aspirations. In this manner the *puja* serves as a medium not only for creating an aura of auspiciousness but as a specific strategy for improving the family's economic well-being and cementing their relationships with people who can influence this.

Osella and Osella (2004) also talk of the performance of ritual in Kerala, where their research is concerned with the social changes wrought by migration. The local temple in the village they studied has since the early twentieth century been the site of "bitter and violent disputes between the Nayars and low caste Izhavas" (p 115). The disputes centred on the Nayar families' exclusive access to the temple and their performance of a mock human sacrifice to the Goddess, while the Izhavas were traditionally relegated to performing another ritual at the end of the mock sacrifice, which was stigmatized as being reserved for them. The situation changed with the promulgation of the Temple Entry Act (1936), which allowed the lower castes to access temples previously out of bounds to them, but also required them to contribute to temple upkeep in monetary terms. In more recent times this dynamic has been further transformed by the high levels of migration to the Gulf. The remittances resulting from migration have changed the socio-economic landscape of Kerala through the transformation of previously low caste/ class groups into people who have money. As the Osellas point out, religious ritual and performance has become a key medium for Gulf returnees to transform their material wealth into social and political status (p 118). As a result, temples and religious performances that had begun to decline have taken on renewed importance. They describe how the correct performance of the ritual *kuthiyottam* (a mock human sacrifice) has become the arbiter of a person's future social status and power. There are two key, but seemingly contrary, qualities that the performance should demonstrate: on the one hand the patron should demonstrate utmost humility, while on the other the performance of the ritual must be a spectacle that pleases the Goddess. For the Nayar families that have performed the ritual for centuries, the Izhavas are regarded as usurping a space where they do not belong and that does not belong to them. This is voiced as criticism of *kuthiyottams* performed by Izhavas as "flashy", a mere "status display", lacking the quality of true devotion (p 123). The patronage of such rituals is also a way for returning migrants to assert belonging and announce claims to power vis-à-vis the local elites. In response, the Nayar elites have linked their own *kuthiyottams* with both their family histories and those of the local temple and goddess. Thus adherence to tradition becomes yet another parameter against which the *kuthiyottams* are evaluated and found wanting by the Nayar elites, since these rituals are not part of the Izhava or low caste tradition.

4   Religion as community

As mentioned earlier, the construction of community in religious terms has been strongly influenced by the ways religious categories became solidified under the colonialism (Freitag, 1980). As noted above, neither Hindus nor Muslims were homogeneous communities with common religious practices. Consolidation of 'communities' along religious lines was associated with urbanization. In addition, these terms soon came to determine where people stood with respect to the state and therefore the nature of their entitlements. For both Hindus and Muslims, the colonial era was marked by competing notions of what it meant to be part of their respective communities. Amongst Muslims, different groups competed for their view of Islam to become the dominant one, leading to the establishment of various schools and educational institutions that promoted different views of the correct religious observances. In the case of the Hindus, caste made the notion of a single community even more problematic. At the same time, the labelling of Hinduism as a backward religion led to the emergence of revivalist and reform movements that tried to transform it into a homogenous set of practices derived from a single scriptural base, as for Christianity and Islam. In large part, attempts to forge a single Hindu identity were linked to a desire to secure government patronage. Although on the face of it Christianity presented a more homogeneous face, Robinson (2003) stresses that it should be talked of as "…communities, rather than community" (p 288), because the denominations and communities emerged at different times in different socio-cultural contexts. She notes that these distinctions are particularly obvious at the level of daily life.

 Sen (2006) describes the emergence of community within an organization with a strong religious orientation. The movement she describes emerged through the coming together of rural Maharahstrian migrant women in Mumbai, who first came to the city during the 1970s to join their men-folk, who were millworkers. The narrative then follows their journeys through the 1980s and 1990s, during which time the cotton mills started shutting down, which in turn often put pressure on the women to take economic responsibility for their families. The initial impetus for the emergence of a religiously-oriented organization was not so much Hindu ideology as the need for a support structure that would help them fight for their rights, secure livelihoods and resources, and replace family and kin-based support in the new urban environment. It also provided some protection against the daily experience of sexual harassment, which was a particularly difficult aspect of their lives as urban workers, requiring constant compromise with their sense of morality when forced to grant sexual favours in order to safeguard their livelihoods. The women came together through the sharing of and identification with each other's stories, but as they realized the power that collective agency and

community gave them, they welcomed the formation of a women's wing that gave them relative freedom from men's decision making, while still providing a patriarchal organizational framework to legitimize their actions. As the organization veered towards a strident Hindu platform, women saw an opportunity to expand their roles and guard the turf that they had so assiduously garnered. They erected strong boundaries around the group to prevent others, including Muslim or 'non-Sena' Hindu women, from encroaching into their community. This community thus allowed them to overcome traditional village and caste identities and forge a new identity within the Sena 'family', which provided them with a means for both organizing celebrations and facing crises in their new environment. Jasani (2008) notes a similar process during the post-riot reconstruction period in Gujarat. Because the organizations assisting the riot victims placed considerable emphasis on religious learning, many who were new to such an atmosphere of piety were able to learn a 'correct way to be' in the new environment, enabling them to create a shared sense of identity that replaced the support structures they had lost (or not previously had).

There are other examples of women's communities formed along religious lines. For example, Vatuk's (2008) study of 'Islamic feminism' identifies various examples of the networks Muslim women's groups have formed to challenge patriarchal constructions of what it means to be a Muslim woman in India. These networks and organizations, like the ones described above, create spaces for women who identify with them to express alternative views of what it means to be part of the Muslim community, which both overlap with and challenge the dominant (patriarchal) views of what it is to be Muslim.

The Neo-Buddhist movement that formed in Maharashtra following Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956 emphasized the equality of men and women (Zelliot, 2000). This was the result of Ambedkar's own emphasis on gender equality - and for that matter the equality of all people - following his reading of Buddhist texts. He emphasized the importance of education as the medium that would help to uplift the underprivileged and allow them to claim their rights. Zelliot describes a community meeting in which some people were accused of adhering to traditional Hindu practices and where it eventually emerged that less literate women were finding it difficult to let go of the customary practices that had held value for them. As a result, education and literacy were increasingly emphasized, leading, in turn, to the emergence of the skills training and education centres that Zelliot describes in her work. It was felt that in order for women to gather together and understand their rights as both

women and former untouchables, education and some form of skills training was necessary. These centres became important places for women to gather together, forging strong community bonds. The intention was not just to educate women, but through that education to help them to understand their (new) religion and its meaning in their lives (Zelliot, 2000). Despite the Neo-Buddhist commitment to equality, however, the leadership of the movement has been dominated by men. More recently, women have begun to make their voices heard and to create spaces for their own leadership. A grassroots leadership eventually emerged from the women's centres described by Zelliot. Although there is not the same sense of 'othering' that the Sena women mentioned above employ to keep others out of their domain, a distinct women's Buddhist identity has emerged. However, in contrast to the Sena women of Mumbai, the women in the groups studied by Zelliot in Maharashtra actively collaborate with other Dalit (Hindu) women and other women's groups, even those that do not identify themselves as Dalit or Neo-Buddhist.

Similar to this group is a Neo-Buddhist women's group that goes by the name of Sujata's Army, in Agra. As Lynch (2000) says, although Dalit politics and social movements have, like more mainstream movements, been dominated by men, this group of women has been able to use Ambedkar's teachings to emancipate themselves and claim a public space; they did this symbolically on the 100th anniversary of Ambedkar's birth in 1991 (p 250). Having used this platform to launch themselves and claim their place alongside the male cadres acted as a catalyst to further challenge their marginalization; firstly as Dalits and secondly as Dalit women. Lynch describes this as dramatically different from his very first interactions with this group in the 1960s, exemplifying it through the Army's 'Ban the Lottery Campaign' of 1995, again in Agra, when they demonstrated against lottery ticket sellers who they saw as responsible for having the ruined the lives of many Dalit men. Lynch describes this as a significant turning point, as through this act "… women set foot not only in a place morally abhorrent to them but also a profoundly male, public place, where resentment against Agra's Dalit Ambedkarites has been longstanding" (p 252). When this demonstration turned violent, with some of the women being injured, it led (ironically) to women from other castes joining in the outcry and coming out in support of the Dalit women. Although it ultimately lost steam, this event was empowering in the way that it allowed a new Dalit women's identity to emerge.[7] What is significant is the way in which this movement, like the one in Maharashtra, used Ambedkar's interpretations of Buddhist teachings to claim space for itself.

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Within Islam, the Tablighi Jama'at has also been portrayed as providing a collective space for individuals to arrive at an understanding of what their religion offers, as well as providing a means of drawing people together within a collective identity (Metcalf, 1998). Tablighi members undertake tours to promote Islam, which Metcalf describes as transformative in character. Since the movement emphasizes simplicity as a way to worship Allah, traditional hierarchies and roles in society are discarded in favour of humility, equality and the service of others, all of which tend to transform relationships amongst the individuals involved, thereby creating a new identity for them. The notion of equality is manifest in various ways: everyone is encouraged to adopt a uniform simple dress, speak in simple language, do menial tasks and share roles; everyone is considered equally capable of contributing to the movement and intellect is not prioritized. The movement allows women to participate, both by joining exclusive women's tour groups, albeit with male relatives as chaperones, and by the formation of local groups in the areas where they live; both these foster a collective identity and solidarity. Although this suggests that men's and women's roles within the movement adhere to gender norms, Metcalf goes on to assert that the emphasis on equality, humility and respect for others helps to challenge the traditional male-female hierarchy within households. Combined with dominant notion that everyone's most important task is the right practice of their religion, the requirement for everyone to do all the daily tasks takes away some of the distinction between men's and women's work. These religious and social practices and the communities that arise out of them appear to be inclusive; within them, consciously or otherwise, the traditional boundaries of class, caste, occupation and to some extent gender are challenged and at least partially changed.

Accounts of the role of women within the political wing of Hinduism portray a different picture. For example, Sarkar (2002), writing about women's role in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) movement, suggests that their inclusion in what was originally an exclusively male preserve is part of a larger transformational effort aimed at expanding the social base of the movement. This, she claims, can be traced to the colonial period and the introduction of separate electorates for Dalits, which bestowed on them an identity distinct from the larger Hindu community. The danger that they will exclude themselves from the RSS, reducing its numbers and challenging Hindu beliefs, has given rise to various preventive strategies, including recognition of women's role within movement through the formation of the Rashtrasevika Samiti. The wider aim of the movement is to ensure the inculcation and observance of Hindu ritual, so as to ensure the reproduction of the religion through successive

generations and include more people in the movement through word-of-mouth association. Women are allotted roles in the private sphere of the family, but are also allowed to assume a role in the public sphere through the RSS and the Rashtrasevika Samiti. Although the latter apparently functions independently, in practice its agenda is controlled by the RSS. It is dedicated to 'serving' the nation, implicitly and explicitly linking women with their traditional role in the family. The family is constantly referred to as the basic social structure, the needs of which must be placed above those of the individual to safeguard it from assault (Sarkar, 2002). Basu (1998) expresses a similar view when she quotes a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) functionary as saying that the aim of the BJP's women's wing is to encourage their members "… not to think about individual rights but in terms of responsibility to the nation" (p 179). This notion reinforces the idea that the self must be submerged in the larger construct of the family and the broader Hindu community. Moreover, as with the Rashtrasevika Samiti, the public roles that women can play are a reflection of their roles within the private sphere. Basu illustrates this by describing how, during the Ramjanmabhumi movement, women cooked and made up food packets for male volunteers who were going to Ayodhya[8] or used their gender status to create a cordon around men, to prevent the police from attacking them with batons. Thus while the women's movement within the Hindu right opens up certain spaces to women, it also circumscribes the roles they are permitted to play and places them in roles that are subservient to the movement and nation at large.

So far this discussion of religion and community has talked about the formation of community and how communities have acted as means of achieving progress and forging collective identities. However the notion of community is also intricately tied up with one's own (community) identity in relation to the 'other', which results in boundaries being drawn between communities. Such boundaries may become more rigid or more flexible in response to wider social changes, resulting in changing social relationships and spatial configurations, which sometimes create tensions between and within groups.

The relationships between Muslims and Hindus in Varanasi, for example, can be traced through the changing incomes and occupational status of the communities and how it is manifest through their spatial/ physical location and the manner in which this, in turn, impacts on their relationships with each other during Hindu festivals (Searle-Chatterjee, 2003; Williams, 2008). Muslim weavers started moving into the silk cloth trading that had previously been dominated by upper caste Hindus, resulting in

increased incomes and, by outbidding their Hindu counterparts in their ability to pay for property, movement into residential areas nearer the River Ganga that had hitherto been considered Hindu. In the contemporary political climate, which has seen a hardening of religious identity, this process has been halted by Hindu groups, which have ordered Hindus to sell their property only to other Hindus. Alongside this, Hindu religious processions have taken on a more aggressive tone, for example deliberately making incursions into Muslim areas that Hindus are attempting to reclaim as their own. Williams (2008) comments on the irony of the fact that these processions receive heavy police protection, even though Hindus far outnumber Muslims. She also juxtaposes these conflicts against the reference by individual Hindus and Muslims to the significant personal and professional relationships they have with members of the other community, suggesting that it is these relationships, 'informal strategies' as she refers to them, that create an in-between space that allows conflicts to be defused.

Frøystad (2005), in her discussion of Hindu-Muslim relationships in the North Indian town of Kanpur, touches on similar shifts in the relationships between the communities. People both claim close personal and professional relationships with members of the other community and, at the same time, see the other community as usurping their own space. This discussion must also be placed against the highly politicized backdrop of Hindu nationalism and the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. However, Frøystad notes, relationships between individuals are not only influenced by religious identity but equally, and in some cases more so, by class and a notion of whether an individual is a 'small person' or a 'big person'. In examining personal relationships, in particular inter-religious marriages, she notes that amongst her (Hindu) acquaintances in Kanpur, there were more inter-religious marriages than inter-caste (or class) ones and that the former were met with weaker sanctions than the latter (p 174). She goes on to note that much the same can be said of inter-religious friendships, in the sense that, while such friendships straddle religious identity, the people involved belong to the same class.

So far the discussion of community has considered how various aspects and types of community are associated with religious identities and ideas. However, as the introduction highlighted, religion is not always the parameter around which community identities crystallize. In practice, religion and religious practices may cut across religious communities and loosen their boundaries. This is perhaps most

notable in the case of healers and their practice. While faith is central to healers' practices, the followers of respected healers usually come from different religious groups. The following examples demonstrate how people justify their faith in a healer or miracle worker. Some refer to the veneration of saints, who are believed to bestow good fortune and health, while others refer to living people who are traditional healers but who are also perceived to have qualities that cause people to almost venerate them.

Dempsey (2002) discusses the veneration of three Christian saints in Kerala, where she comments on the fact that their veneration sweeps aside inconvenient facts about their origins or the source of their powers. The first of these saints, Marttasmuni[9], in whose honour there are many churches in Kerala, on closer examination turns out to be of Jewish origin. In fact Dempsey describes her own confusion when visiting an Orthodox Syrian Church that, along with the necessary paraphernalia for a Christian service, also had Jewish menorahs and where the seven branches of the menorah are explained as representing Marttasmuni's seven children. The saint is venerated because of her staunch Judaism and the embellishment of her life story with deeds that demonstrate how she lived by her religious ideals, although Christians claim her as their own by stressing that she "…waited upon the coming of our Lord and led a holy life" (p 120). As Dempsey points out, although Marttasmuni's devotion was entirely based on Jewish practice, her goodness allows her to be viewed in "a Christian light" (p 120). Thus her power to perform miracles imbues her with a holiness that allows devotees of all faiths to ignore what seems to them to be the minor detail of her origins.

The second saint whose story Dempsey narrates is Kattamattachan, who is venerated as having magical powers that can heal. In his case, it is the story of how he acquired his magical powers, which alludes to his mingling with Hindu-like mythological creatures, that brings to the fore his non-Christian origins and places his methods outside the Christian fold. At the same time, the narrative justifies his sainthood by painting his acts as constantly serving the good, while some also see him as being mentored by a miracle-working bishop, to further ensure his acceptance within the Church. The third Christian saint Dempsey discusses is a beatified nun from Kerala, Sr. Alphonsa, whose most famous act of healing was a posthumous one that cured a Muslim boy of physical disability. This seems to be an important detail of her story, although the narrator was keen to emphasize that the miracle did not make the boy convert to Christianity. On the contrary, the narrator was keener to stress

that the beatified nun administers to the sick and needy irrespective of their religious affiliation. Through these stories of healing, Dempsey discusses how religious boundaries can soften. As she says, in all these cases it is not the religious affiliation of the healer or the healed that matters as much as the healing power and the act of healing. While religious affiliation is not forgotten, it recedes into the background on such occasions.

Flueckiger (2006), in her work on a female Muslim healer, Amma, in the city of Hyderabad, makes a similar point. Amma herself is quoted as saying that "there are only two castes: men and women" (p 137), meaning that religious and caste differences do not matter. This view is reiterated in different ways by her female patients: one said "We say Rahim; you say Ram, Ram. But there are no differences, just men and women" (ibid), while another bemoans the fact that men have the freedom to do as they choose while women are constantly constrained by social norms and must seek forgiveness for the slightest perceived transgression. While, as Flueckiger points out, these are "formulaic phrases" (ibid), they nonetheless reflect the fact that,in daily life, religious boundaries shift from rigid positions. Since many of the norms are couched in language that is sanctioned by religion, the fact that Amma herself both transgresses them and seeks sanction from the same religious sources is an interesting point in itself. As Flueckiger tells it, in the healing space, religion is certainly significant as a source of spiritual power, bestowing Amma with qualities that have allowed her to be a healer. However, her religion is not an important identity marker, source of difference (her patients belong to all religions) or basis for unity. In Amma's case, illness (or troubles) is the most important and the act of healing is marked by the manner in which it assimilates practices from various faiths in order to serve the patient. Amma (and her husband) are adept at drawing out the similarities between Islam and other religions (Hinduism in particular), by equating gods, prophets, spiritual power and sacred acts from the various faiths; in this manner they legitimize to some extent the way in which their healing draws on the ritual practice of various religions, some of which share ideas such as the healing power of sacred water. In Amma's case these diverse strands are re-formed into a coherent ritual that is unquestionably religious, but not in a manner familiar from any particular religion.

5   Religion as a source of values and meaning

The earlier sections have talked about the ways in which people engage with religion in order to improve their material and social well-being, but an underlying factor in their engagement has to do with the sense of values that a particular religious affiliation conveys and whether and how it provides a source of meaning in their lives.

There are strong ideas about the values underlying religious beliefs and practices, which although not universal, may command spaces in the public imagination. One of these value associations is the notion that Hinduism is a religion based on inequality, because of its association with the caste system, an area that has received a great deal of attention. In order to explore this further, this section will look at some ways that Dalits speak of religion, in particular Hinduism, but also other religions to which they have turned instead. One strong denunciation of Hinduism that comes through in Dalit voices refers to their strong feelings of humiliation resulting from the behaviour of the upper castes (Fernando, Macwan and Ranganathan, 2004). On the one hand, this humiliation is what continues to keep them subjugated, rendering them unable to take advantage of the laws that have been introduced to address some of the traditional constraints they have faced. However, it has also acted as a trigger for social activism, conversion to other faiths that profess equality for all people, or reinterpretation of Hindu myths to bestow a better position on Dalits. Examples of all three are given by Fernando et al (2004).

All the Dalits in their narratives talk about the humiliation to which they are constantly subjected because of the fact that they are Dalit and how this humiliation ultimately becomes so unbearable that it is the source of their activism, whatever form it takes. In one case study they describe the journey of a Dalit social activist who initially depended largely on rights guaranteed by the state to pursue his agenda of social change. However, the sheer impenetrability of a system that is largely neglectful of the needs of such a historically oppressed group, coupled with the diffidence of his fellow community members, eventually led him to abandon his strong activism. It appears that his disappointment with the failure of his activism to achieve progress was one source of his motivation to convert to Christianity. However, the final trigger was an act of healing, in which his disabled child was cured during a healing meeting. Although initially scornful about the healing, he reported that he ultimately came to feel that God had touched him. The notion that God is there for all people became an important part of his thinking about religion and a source of support in the face of his increasing

disillusionment with the unresponsive government system. The same man also talked about personal changes that had resulted from his conversion, for example, that he had become less angry and less likely to vent his anger on members of his family (Fernando et al, 2004, p 227). Increasingly therefore, it appears that he had begun to see religion as more essential to his sense of personal well-being than his social activism seems to have been in the past.

Another case that Fernando et al (2004) examine in some detail is that of a Dalit woman who, although illiterate and from an extremely economically marginalized Dalit family, was able to stand for election to a reserved seat for Dalits in the village *panchayat*. She described herself as being pliable and unaware early in her term of office, but claimed that she was able to gradually work up the courage and confidence to question the decisions and actions of the upper caste-dominated *panchayat*. Her narrative described a journey marked by constant struggles to fight the oppression to which Dalits are subject. At the same time, however, the authors discuss her religious and spiritual identification with the cult of a locally revered saint who is commonly thought to be an incarnation of the popular god Krishna. Although the festival associated with this local deity is controlled by the upper caste communities in the village, the Dalit community has a ritual role without which the festival cannot proceed. In this individual's narrative, this role assumes such significance that it is described as the base on which the entire festival rests. In this way the Dalits' contribution is made significant and their status in the community is enhanced in their (or this individual's) eyes. A myth is woven around this role to suggest that the Dalits had been removed from what was once a far better role in the community, suggesting that their current status is due to the machinations of the upper castes. This cult is the focus of the worship for many of the Dalit women of the community, particularly the older women. In identifying with the cult, they seem to be espousing traditional values to do with the role of women and their place in society. The authors quote their informant as saying that these older women "…instil good values in younger women, we advise them not to go out alone, and to keep good company…[also]…to live happily, she must abstain from going somewhere if her husband doesn't permit her [and that young women]…may be daughters of a king but before their husbands they are mere wives" (Fernando et al, 2004, p 232). The authors are concerned to illustrate the apparent disjuncture between the image their informant cultivates of a "daring Dalit woman" (p 230) and her view that women's roles are circumscribed by the domestic sphere. However, what is pertinent here is not just that she derives her sense of personal value from her devotion to this local deity but also that she attributes her entry into public life as a spokesperson against the oppression of the Dalits to this

very same sense of value. She said, for instance, that she reported the actions of the *panchayat* to the elders of her community because "…God has given me a human avatar and, I have to do justice to it" (p 231). She attributed her courage in speaking up to public officials to "such practical lessons from historical tales that we hear", but also asked young Dalit men to coach and educate her so that she would be able to raise her voice in public. Thus the value that she attributed to her worship and devotion shapes not only the realm of personal relationships, but also the public sphere in which she assumes a vastly different role, imbuing both with meaning. The authors draw parallels with the manner in which women's roles have been conceived within the Hindutva movement, but also cannot help wondering whether identification with this cult is an example of Dalits assuming the more Sankritised lifestyle of the upper castes in order to eradicate their low ritual status or represents the appropriation of an accessible popular god as their own in defiance of upper caste authority (p 240).

Bradley (2008) also suggests that the religious or spiritual realm shapes all the activities in which people are involved. She traces this through examining the work of two Gandhian NGOs in Rajasthan. Both are involved in training community health volunteers and both trace their values to the Gandhian philosophy of service. However, she distinguishes between them with respect to how they relate to their trainees during the training programme and how a shared worship space is used as a means to create a trusting relationship between an NGO and its trainees. The women who have been chosen to undergo training as community health volunteers in both week-long residential training programmes gathered together to create shrines. They said that this reminds them of home and allows them to pray for their husbands and children. The management of one of the NGOs, while allowing the shared space to be used for worship, amongst other activities, does not itself join in daily worship at the shrine. In addition, its management style ensures that barriers between the trainees (lay people) and the trainers (experts) are clearly maintained. The management of the second NGO, in contrast, not only actively encouraged the creation of the shrine but also actively participates in the daily worship rituals. Bradley suggests that the ritual space of worship created an opportunity for the management to understand the fears and hopes of the trainees. In addition, the familiarity of the ritual context and the fact that the group had created the shrine established shared values with which each individual could identify, infusing the activity with the qualities of solidarity and safety. By participating in this space in exactly the same manner as the trainees, managers were able to overcome the barriers of caste and tribe, uneducated and expert, and were able to develop an understanding of the obstacles the trainees foresaw in their work, enabling strategies to address the obstacles to be identified.

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Bradley suggests that this sensitive understanding of the ritual context and culture of the group was instrumental in ensuring the success and longevity of this programme compared to the other (2008, p 514).

Osella and Osella's (2008) description of the lives of Muslim communities in Kerala gives another perspective on the way religion is lived out in daily life, in the context of changing definitions of what it is to be both modern and Muslim in a changing, modern world. The need to redefine what is Islamic has arisen out of the global growth of Islam; although at the same time, reformist Muslim leaders see their practices as both deeply rooted in the culture of Kerala and needing to be defended against the influence of the Hindu culture. They maintain this fine balance in two ways: first, by advocating distance from what are perceived as non-Islamic practices, such as the veneration of saints in return for favours and the granting of wishes, and second by a return to pure Islamic worship based on the Qur'an. The latter and other scriptural texts are translated into the vernacular (Malyalam), not only to make them more accessible to the entire community, but also to ensure that the Muslim community's focus on Arabic learning does not exclude them from other local currents. This focus on learning and education for all community members is seen as a particularly significant way of shaping their values and providing a basis for distinguishing within the Muslim community a class that is willing to embrace modern education while remaining true to the 'original' teachings of the Qur'an and to Muslim worship.

Kirmani (2008a) talks in a similar vein when discussing the construction of a Muslim way of life in a residential area in Delhi. The narrative, based on the voices of various individuals from diverse backgrounds, looks at how they all came to choose Zakir Nagar, a Muslim-dominated area in New Delh, in which to live. The individuals talk, in one way or another, of the need to be able to live in an environment that reflects their sense of values and with which they are familiar. In some respects their motivations varied, with some attributing their move to Zakir Nagar to economic factors and others to the sense of security that they get from being in a Muslim community in a religiously charged atmosphere. Despite the varied motives given, the underlying pull of a Muslim atmosphere also emerges as people talk about the proximity of mosques and madrasas; the large community of fellow worshippers; the freedom to live as they wish (for women this translates into freedom to wear a *burqua* or *nakaab* without feeling challenged regarding this choice); and the sense of living with one's kinfolk and therefore being able to perform all the rituals that go along with various life events, such as

mourning rituals. Some women talked about the unconscious ease with which their children had learned the correct ways of worship and the respect they now hold for their traditions; while one woman who had previously lived in a predominantly Hindu area talked about how living in Zakir Nagar had helped her to read the Qur'an and start performing *namaz,* affording her peace of mind. Thus the Muslim atmosphere refers not just to religious practice and ritual but also to a broader way of life for the people who had chosen to live in the neighbourhood.

While it is no doubt true that religion is a significant source of meaning in many people's lives, this can be ambiguous. This is apparent in Simpson's ethnographic study of three men's attitudes to saint worship in Gujarat (2008). Simpson describes constant negotiation between various forms of practice with respect to saint worship, which is variously practised and frowned upon by different strands within Islam. Rafiq, one of the people that Simpson profiles, is disdainful of saint worship, seeing it as obstructing a person's relationship with Allah, although he still gives alms to holy men who seek them in the name of a saint. As he describes it, his rationale is that he would not wish the holy man to visit a curse upon him because he refused to give alms, although he claims that this is the only thing he would do to propitiate a saint and any further extravagant saint worship would be abhorrent to him. What is interesting is that he cites the same source of values to both condemn and, to some extent comply with, the practice. Of course, as Simpson notes, this somewhat contradictory stance is due in part to Rafiq's political and leadership aspirations, as befitting his status, which require that he worship the same saints that he once shunned.

6   Religion and social change

The earlier sections have talked about the various ways in which religion is implicated in processes of social change, through conversion, the ways that religious boundaries crystallize or loosen and the ways in which people subscribe to or shed their religious identities. Religion has been very much in the public sphere in India in the last 15 to 20 years because of the ascendancy of the Hindutva movement and reactions to it, as well as the growth of identity politics around issues of caste and religion. These changes have been accompanied by unprecedented growth in the economy, which is now more open than ever before and so strongly impacted by the process of globalization.

These economic changes have been accompanied by significant social change. For example, Fernandes and Heller (2006) describe the growth of the new middle classes that has accompanied the liberalization of the economy and led to challenges to the status quo, often meeting with resistance from socially dominant groups, which may religion and caste in the process. Their analysis suggests that religion (equally with caste) is a key basis for drawing lines of difference that seek to preserve the advantage that upper caste (and upper class) Hindus have enjoyed over the centuries and that has only been heightened by the manner in which the educational system developed and new professions emerged during the colonial and post-independence periods. They emphasize the cultural capital that goes along with the ascribed high status of the dominant groups, to which new groups do not have access, with the result that they are unable to improve their 'navigational capacity' (see Appadurai, 2004, p 69).

Alongside this preoccupation with the changes occurring at the broad macro-level of nation and community, there an engagement with religion at the more immediate level of family and local community. As White (2009) points out, this level provides a microcosm through which to examine what is happening in society more broadly (p 4). As in Bangladesh, where White grounds her research, so too in India, the family plays a significant role in reproducing the moral order, by reinforcing appropriate gender roles or establishing an individual's responsibility to the wider community. As the examples given above demonstrate, this is most evident in the manner that reformist movements, both Hindu and Muslim, tend to see the family (especially women) as the crucial medium through which religion and culture are reproduced in an acceptable form. The contemporary emphasis on women's education (especially religious education) seems particularly instrumental (see Metcalf, 1998; Osella and Osella, 2008; Sarkar, 2002), in spite of the fact that the education of women

may also erode the boundaries between inside and outside that govern women's mobility. However, even when women challenge the accepted boundary, they refer to force of circumstance, which is said to allow them no other choice, as the women in Sen's study of the Shiv Sena appear to suggest (see Sen, 2006). Another way of justifying challenges to the boundary that restricts women's activities to the private sphere is to explain them in religious terms, as in the example of the Dalit woman leader from Gujarat given in an earlier section (see Fernando et al, 2004).

A third important change is the sense that identities, particularly religious identities, seem to be crystallizing further, leading to what Kirmani (2008b) refers to as nostalgia for a past that is "…frequently romanticised as a time of greater religious harmony" (p 399). This theme appears at various points, particularly in narratives of Hindu-Muslim relationships, with individuals alluding to their personal friendships with individuals from the other community as symbolizing a more tolerant past (see also Frøystad, 2005). Although in many cases individuals emphasize that they have not themselves been the target of prejudice, the perception that religious identities are becoming more salient and fixed reflects a more general atmosphere of intolerance. As in the Muslim neighbourhood in Delhi studied by Kirmani (2008a, 2008b), it can also lead to increased residential segregation. In some cases, this reflects community members choosing to live together, in others it may be a response to the atmosphere of increased intolerance, while there are also instances in which it reflects a specific strategy to keep people in their place, as Simpson (2008) and Jasani (2008) illustrate from their research in Gujarat. The danger is that residential segregation results in the further hardening of community identities.

However, increased intolerance and segregation should be not be read as the only, or even the dominant, narrative regarding inter-community relations. An equally forceful voice, which may well be a reaction to the atmosphere of intolerance, constantly seeks to smooth over apparent fissures by reiterating the points at which communities come together in an atmosphere of tolerance, whether this is in the stories about healing or where lines of religious difference are overcome by shared troubles.

The discussion above refers to the relationships between religious communities, but there is also a sense of shifting caste boundaries, shifts which are also fraught with conflict and tension because they challenge entrenched dominant groups. One of the ways that caste boundaries have been challenged has been through conversion to other faiths, which has yielded mixed results for those

concerned, as discussed above. Conversions have not only been marked by conflict and tension, but have also resulted in the established forms of religion - Hindu traditions particularly, but also the Christian and Muslim faiths - having to constantly reflect on their practices and reinvent themselves in order to stave off or accommodate the aspirations of newly emergent voices. Thus, religion is connected in many ways to different strands of change that variously reinforce, challenge or create new meanings for religious practice.

7 Concluding comments

This literature review has attempted to highlight some ways in which religion and well-being seem to be linked. It cannot claim to be a comprehensive review of the literature, and indeed it bears repeating that drawing out the links is a difficult task, given that well-being is a complex concept. It is embedded in the everyday, much as religion is, so that the task of separating it from the roundedness of people's lives risks stripping it of meaning. In addition, few of the analyses on which this discussion has drawn explicitly refer to well-being, and so the links between well-being and the questions of religion, identity, community and meaning with which they are concerned are not made explicit.

Notes

[1]   See Madan (1987) for a brief description of how secularism is viewed in the context of the Indian state and how it has come to acquire these meanings. Essentially secularism is posited as a stance whereby the state remains equidistant from all religions, rather than the complete absence of religion from the public sphere

[2]   See Gooptu (1996, 1997) for a more in-depth discussion of policing measures against lower class migrants.

[3]   See Arun (2007, p 88) for a detailed explanation of the reasons that the Paraiyars' ritual participation in the Mariamman Festival is essential.

[4]   See Arun (2007, pp 90-91) to understand both processes of traditional identity formation and the consciousness of their new identity.

[5]   Jodhka (2002) discusses various instances of this in gurdwaras and their management.

[6]   See Säävalä (2003) for a detailed discussion of auspiciousness in the context of Hindu households.

[7]   See Lynch (2000) for a nuanced analysis of this process.

[8]   Hindus were mobilized to destroy the Babri Masjid, a mosque allegedly built on the site of a Hindu temple in Ayodhya Uttar Pradesh. The Babri Masjid was vandalized on 6 December, 1992 by a large Hindu mob in the presence of both religious and political leaders representing the Hindu right. The demolition of the mosque was followed by large-scale Hindu-Muslim riots in many parts of North India and famously by a series of bomb blasts in Mumbai, leading in turn to communal riots there between December 1992 and January 1993.

[9]   See Dempsey (2002) for detailed narratives about the three healers.

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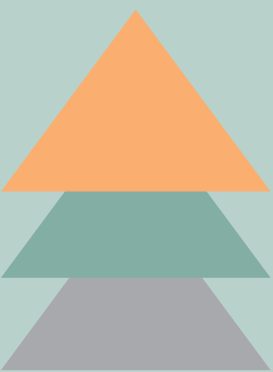
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