In This Issue

In this issue we have a special emphasis on South Asia. Starting from headlines about the present-day struggle in the northern Indian city of Ayodhyā over a sixteenth-century Muslim mosque that militant Hindus assert must be returned to their control as the temple commemorating the birth of the Hindu god Rāma, SHELDON POLLOCK asks when the Rāmāyaṇa first took on a political character. His answer is that until the twelfth century, the hero of the epic, Rāma, had little political significance. Instead, Rāma's cult blossomed only when Hindu kings found in the Rāmāyaṇa's story of the contest between Rāma and the demonized figure of evil, Rāvaṇa, a parallel for their own struggle against Turkic political power. Pollock believes the Rāma cult grew during the twelfth century in direct response to the equation of Rāma and Hindu kings as the protectors of the purity of the Hindu polity against foreigners. He also suggests that Karl Marx's insight that revolutionaries often "anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battles cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history" can help us understand the potential for violence that lies within present-day Hindu invocation of the primacy of Rāma.

MURRAY MILNER, JR., employs formal sociological methodology to draw a connection—an "elective affinity," in Weber's terms—between the principles governing the Hindu social structure and Hindu eschatology. Not only does Hinduism embody a structured inequality in its assumptions about people in this life, but, he argues, it contains a similar inequality in describing its positions about the world-to-come. Specifically, he argues that the three key eschatological concepts in Hinduism—*samsara*, *karma*, and *moksa*—should be seen as structural reversals of the restrictions imposed on individuals by the caste system. So, *samsara*—an individual's repeated reincarnation into new lives—can be seen as promising endless social mobility in a society where opportunities for such movement are severely limited by the caste system. Milner is adding Lévi-Strauss's notions of structuralism and reversal to Weberian sociological analysis. Milner rejects the idea that such structural reversals need be compensatory. Indeed, he raises doubts about what the direction of causation may be between religious ideas and the social system. He concludes we do not know the direction of causation in the case of Hindu religion and society and thus cannot determine how these reversals were produced.

JANET A. CONTURSI's subject is the intersection of theology, politics, and class. Her study concerns an organization of Hindu ex-Untouchables based in Bombay who have converted to Buddhism and formed a political party advocating a democratic socialist state. Known originally as the Dalit Panthers, this movement began in 1972 and borrowed the view of the American Black Panther Party that the downtrodden may use violence to resist their oppressors. Its ideology combines the Buddhism of the early Untouchable leader B. R. Ambedkar with the Marxism derived from Naxalite activists. Contursi focuses on a splinter group, led by lower-class individuals, that operates in the Bhimnagar slum of Bombay. She sees these leaders as embodying the radical spirit both of Ambedkar and the original Dalit Panthers. She argues that the class basis of this Dalit community provides true potential to subvert the existing social order. Thus, she concludes that the combination of radical

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002191180012916X Published online by Cambridge University Press

reform Buddhism, Marxism, and lower-class leadership makes a particularly effective means to resist oppression.

SARA DICKEY explores the connections between the South Indian cinema and politics in "The Politics of Adulation." She focuses on M. G. Ramachandran (popularly known as "MGR"), a film idol turned politician, who served as Chief Minister in Tamil Nadu for a decade before his death in 1987. She shows how MGR had crafted a film persona as a romantic hero and protector of the poor. In India, with its preference for political leaders who are attractive persons acting in altruistic ways, MGR then worked to transfer his film persona into political office. The electorate was so convinced that his political values mirrored his film roles that his reputation survived attacks by rivals and evidence of his own corruption and moral laxity. Dickey also demonstrates how MGR used his fan clubs both as patronage networks and as a means to display in real life his film reputation for altruism, thereby creating a reinforcing network of merit. These clubs, which are involved in a range of film-oriented, political, and social service activities, are dominated by lower-class men for whom the fan clubs can also provide an avenue to some political power and status. As a political cadre and a grooming ground, the clubs stand apart from the regular political party. Dickey believes the elements of uniting cinema and political leadership reflect deeper patterns in South Indian political culture.

CHAD HANSEN challenges views about written Chinese deriving from Leonard Bloomfield's aphorism, "Writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by visible marks." This interpretation of written Chinese—forcefully advanced by Peter Boodberg, William Boltz, John DeFrancis, and David Keightley—holds that any written language is representationally dependent upon speech and consequently Chinese characters are not ideographic. Hansen argues such views are incorrect because they fail to explain mathematics or sign language, and conflict with results from brain research; further, he rejects as circular Aristotelian notions that ideas interpose between written words and things. Hansen is convinced that Chinese characters are like Arabic numbers and require no such mediation. He believes that if we understand Chinese characters as ideographic, we can unlock a conventional path to linguistic meaning that present Western theory misses, namely, that characters do not represent ideas, but replace them in semantic theory. He argues that Chinese characters function as public conventions of meaning and thus are "ideographic" in the common sense of the word. He holds that studies of sign languages and studies of language function in the human brain both indicate that language is not dependent upon speech and can be based upon patterns of signs. Thus, he concludes that even if any written form of language based on Chinese characters can be shown to derive from speech, that does not disprove the ideographic nature of the characters. Thus, it is proper to continue to use the popular term "ideographic" when describing Chinese or other East Asian languages using Chinese characters.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002191180012916X Published online by Cambridge University Press