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In his work on the popular Hinduism of Nepalese castes, Marc Gaborieau has always given great prominence to the classical tradition of India. One recalls how he drew a parallel between the jāgar possession cults of far-western Nepal and the notion of avatār (ie incarnation, descent of the god into the earthly world) (Gaborieau 1975), as well as that of meditation, dhyāna, both associated with religious doctrines of ancient Hinduism. His article on the annual Hindu calendar and on the Nepalese festival calendar, published some forty years ago in 1982 in the journal L’Homme and whose English translation is made available in this issue for the first time, is representative of this approach. The festivals of the Indo-Nepalese (ie the Parbatiyā, Hindu populations of the hills divided into castes and speaking Nepali as their mother tongue) are related to astrological and religious conceptions which go back to the old Indian Sanskrit civilisation, such as the division of the annual calendar into six seasons, the division of the year into two parts according to the direction of the sun’s path and the four-month (rainy season) cycle, placed under the authority of the god Śiva and corresponding to the period during which Viṣṇu, the guarantor of socio-cosmic order, sleeps at the bottom of the ocean. The two solstices, the summer one and the winter one, and the twelve lunar months of the year structure the whole. Table 1 in the article, entitled ‘The Hindu calendar’, which is widespread in Nepal, groups together in a single figure these different temporalities, all of which derive in fact from textual, erudite conceptions. The last two lunar months of the rainy season mark a break in the cycle: they correspond to a general dissolution, a descent into hell, ‘outside of time’, marked during the festivities by all sorts of excesses and questioning of the established order in accordance with the model of the transgressive festival. This period of dissolution, the equivalent of a pralaya (annihilation, cosmic resorption) in classical Hindu
cosmogonies, is followed by a general regeneration. Celebrating the New Year at this
time of the year, as is customary among the Newar of the Kathmandu Valley, therefore
seems more logical than celebrating it in spring, as the so-called Indo-Nepalese do.

2 Like any other Hindu rite, whether daily or exceptional, festivals (almost always
religious observances) are correlated here with Sanskrit culture of the first centuries of
our era, as codified in the great Hindu religious texts and epics. It is this ‘Great
Tradition’, as American anthropologists Robert Redfield and Milton Singer (1955) called
it, which sheds light on the rites and festivals and gives them their full meaning. It
should be noted that the terms of reference given by M. Gaborieau are in Sanskrit, not
in vernacular languages, Nepali for example. This approach was widely shared by
researchers of the Centre d’études indiennes (Centre for Indian Studies), CEI in French,
(it was renamed CEIAS, Centre d’études de l’Inde et de l’Asie du Sud, in 1975) – at least
during its first years of existence – where M. Gaborieau spent his entire career and with
which he is still affiliated today. Madeleine Biardeau (2005) and Marie-Louise Reiniche,
for example, read the popular rites they observed during their field trips to India in
light of the Mahābhārata, the Rāmāyana and the Dharmaśāstras. This approach is rooted
in Louis Dumont’s idea of India as an organic totality: ethnography and Orientalist
studies were therefore inseparable.

3 Should we oppose this ‘armchair view’ to a ‘view from the field’, as some have tried to
do? I don’t think so. In the Indian world, the two visions are closely related and
interpenetrate each other. Moreover, M. Gaborieau, at the time of his research on
Nepalese religion, had great experience of empirical realities and was perfectly familiar
with the categories of thought of the Parbatiyā of the hills. The notions he expounds
with the greatest clarity about the great Nepalese festivals, Dasaī, Tihar, makār and sāun
saṅkrānti, correspond to local conceptions and are particularly relevant even today.

4 The article translated in this issue is admittedly schematic. Nothing is said about the
extremely important role, in the lives of individuals, of astrology in Nepal, its
specialists, the Jośī (Jyotiśī) (Cf Guenzi 2013) and the cinā horoscopes drawn up at birth.
The divisions between the high castes and the so-called traditionally impure castes,
who did not have access to temples and were denied access to learning the canonical
Hindu texts in ancient times, are also glossed over. Although they all celebrate the
same festivals, the Brahmins’ religion is obviously not the same as that of the Matvāli
Chetri of western Nepal, and a fortiori of the so-called impure castes such as the Damāi
and the Sārki. Similarly, the text does not point out the difference in Indian calendars
between those that start the lunar month on the day after the full moon, pūrṇimā, as in
Nepal and northern India, and those that start it on the day after the new moon, aūsi,
such as those in southern India (but also in Bengal, Assam and Gujarat). Nepalese
Parbatiyā follow the first of these two cycles, while the Newar of the Kathmandu Valley,
also highly Indianised, have chosen the second. As in all of L. Dumont’s Indian
anthropology, the functions that are strictly political are given little consideration
here. It may also be noted that this overall structure can easily be supplemented by
complementary analyses corresponding either to the actual experience of attending
these festivals or to more anthropological notions such as those developed by
Frédérique Marglin (1985) in her study of the Jagannātha temple of Puri in Orissa.¹
Besides, the special issue of the journal L’Homme (‘Les fêtes dans le monde hindou’), in
which M. Gaborieau’s article first appeared and which I edited and introduced (Toffin
1982), develops complementary and sometimes competing approaches. More generally,
Hinduism is defined more in terms of the relationship between its different levels than in terms of opposition between the isolated, disjointed poles of its social reality.

All this holds true, but M. Gaborieau’s main intention was to highlight the general intellectual framework, the global structure. The analysis of the space-time of the Nepalese Hindu calendar remains one of the strong points of his presentation. In the Nepalese world, the two notions, temporal and spatial, merge together. Space is directly linked to time and topology to chronology. They are skilfully interlaced. Religious life is entirely inscribed in the seasons and the lunar cycle. Classical Indian thought thus establishes a certain number of equations between the cardinal points, the seasons and the four great eras, yuga, of time. Winter, for example, is associated with the first era of the world, satyayuga (or kṛtayuga), and the northeast, while summer corresponds to the current kaliyuga era and the west. M. Gaborieau attempts to show the importance of this analogical network based on a text about Buddhist iconography, a doctrinal corpus written during the first millennium CE and entitled Śādhanaśālā. As we will see, this text which overlaps more fundamental Indian notions establishes a term-by-term analogy between the moments of the temporal cycle and the cardinal points. Thus, the clockwise journey over a religious space around a temple or sacred city, pradaksinā, very early in the day always begins in the northeast, which is identified with the centre and, as we have seen, with the first era of the world, satyayuga. The procession then moves east, corresponding to the middle of the day and the second yuga, the tretā, then south, west, and finally reaches the north. At one of the Saturday morning seminars held at the Centre d’études indiennes, which I attended in the 1970s, Madeleine Biardeau was astonished at the use of a Buddhist calendar to shed light on the Hindu time cycle. But, as far as Nepal is concerned, this reference does not introduce any misunderstanding of the festive calendar.

This combined approach of ethnography and Indian Sanskrit heritage, which contrasts with the materialistic approach developed by Marcel Mauss (quoted by M. Gaborieau in the epigraph to his text) concerning the spaces/times of Eskimo populations, has recently been the subject of criticism. The most vehement, but also the most unfair, is that of Axel Michaels. In an article published in Contributions to Indian Sociology in 2020, this researcher, a philologist specialised in Nepal but also an ethnographer of Nepalese temples, takes issue with the alliance between anthropology and Orientalism defended by L. Dumont (Michaels 2020). The analysis, which includes no reference to French anthropologists – bar L. Dumont who is quoted only to be criticised –, is certainly more in keeping with our times than that of the author of Homo hierarchicus, which gives primacy to religion in the reading of Indian civilisation, an approach that can lead, if taken too literally, to a barbaric, medieval world used by the Indian nationalist right, Hindutva, for political purposes. Michaels rightly points out that India is ‘not one’, as L. Dumont claims, but very diverse. Yet he curiously restricts Indology to the reading and editing of ancient texts, without considering that it also concerns the whole Indian discourse, both religious and non-religious, of the so-called classical period. Carried away by his criticism, Michaels finally gives a particularly narrow view of his discipline, forgetting the major texts written by his colleagues – Renou, Biardeau, Malamoud, Vaudeville (the latter for more recent religious texts) to mention only a few French names – on the canonical Indian tradition. Under the pretext that Brahmans are not as important as they are said to be and that they are not always placed at the top of the hierarchy, Michaels finally refutes a method that he himself used in his ethnographic
book on the temple of Pasupatinath (2008). Customs and practices are nevertheless embedded in the symbolic and the symbolic is embedded in practices.

7 Like many Indians, the Nepalese are immersed, unknowingly one might say and from their early childhood, in an environment permeated by learned Indian conceptions. In support of M. Gaborieau’s theories, I would like to mention here the example of popular calendars, pancreṅg, pāṭro, used everywhere in Hindu Nepal (and often even in the country’s ethnic minority groups as well as among Nepalese Buddhist populations), which set the dates not only for festivals but also for the whole of local religious life. Traditionally, pāṭro almanacs, written by religious scholars, mostly Brahmins, were widely distributed in the districts of Nepal and its rural hinterland. In the 1970s, some shops and ciyē pasal (tea stalls) in agricultural areas of the Kathmandu Valley made them available to their customers, sometimes hanging them on their walls to be consulted free of charge. These booklets, written in Nepali, set out the religious calendar for the current year, the dates of the festivals corresponding to each lunation, the months and lunar fortnights propitious for marriages and initiations, etc. They divide the week (which begins on Sunday, not Monday) into good days, sātśubhā, and bad days, bēsāt, positive and negative days; they indicate the days on which one can go on a journey, conclude a business deal, worship a god, buy a head of cattle. Monday is dedicated to Mahādeva/Siva, Tuesday is inauspicious, Wednesday is reserved for Buddhist deities and Bhairava, Thursday for the moon goddess Candraṃā (in Nepal, this is a female figure, whereas in ancient Hinduism the moon is considered more of a male celestial body and god) and for the gods of music, Saturday (the ‘hardest’ day of the week, as it is associated with Saturn, Śani, the most feared of all the planets, always a source of great suffering) is for the worship of goddesses and the like.² For these populations, astronomical space-time matters just as much as social space. The destiny of individuals is read in the heavenly realms.

8 The date of a domestic rite of passage is rarely set without consulting these almanacs. If necessary, the lunar day (tithi) is chosen with a Jōśī astrologer. The date, the time of birth of children, the constellation under which this particular day is placed (janmanakṣatra) are, after all, carefully noted because they will enable the astrologer to determine the name of the newborn. Later on, it is by comparing the horoscopes (cinā) of the boy and the girl who are to be married that a projected union is concluded. These celestial signs are taken seriously in rural areas as well as in cities, including among the wealthiest families. Almanacs dictate acts of everyday life. Being born under a bad star (mul, mulyāḥā in Nepali) can condemn this or that person, a convinced victim of fate, to a miserable life and cause misfortune. In the absence of public clocks, clock jacks and bells ringing the hour at the top of churches, all these religious concepts and markers, those of festivals and periodic rites, traditionally contributed to marking time, no doubt just as much as did the more secular changing of the seasons, of day and night, or the cannons that not so long ago were still fired at noon in some of Kathmandu’s barracks.

9 These non-modern models are based, as M. Gaborieau writes, on segmented and qualified spaces, as well as on a cyclical conception of time. They are underpinned by a vast system of correspondences that includes colours, elements, metals, times of day, seasons, parts of the human body and eventually encompasses the entire universe. These merged and all-encompassing conceptions of space/time are opposed to modern Western conceptions that lay more emphasis on isotropic, continuous and
homogeneous spaces, as well as on linear, oriented, cumulative times. They tend to be eroded in modern Nepal, at least in cities. Astrological temporalities continue to play an important role, including in the political world, but collective rhythms are less linked than in the past to spatial qualifications of a symbolic nature. The use of natural reference points (seasons, daily cycle) is on the decline and new flexibilities in the organisation of work or modern means of transportation contribute to disrupting the old order of things. Traditional festivals are still celebrated with fervour, but chronology and topography have tended to become dissociated. They increasingly face competition by secular, political festivals commemorating the advent of democracy and the republic (which replaced Hindu royalty in May 2008). As for young urbanites, they now celebrate Christmas, the Western New Year and St Valentine’s Day. In this way, they seek to show their modernity without, however, giving up traditional festivals.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. See also Feldhauss (2006).

2. The Nepalese are quick to point out that the great earthquake of 2015 occurred on a Saturday. Weddings are not usually celebrated on this day of the week (nor on a Tuesday, for that matter) (cf Guenzi, op. cit).
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