Macrocasm, mesocosm, and microcosm: The persistent nature of ‘Hindu’ beliefs and symbolic forms

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INTRODUCTION: MESOCOSM

With his recent book, *Mesocosm: Hinduism and the organization of a traditional Newar city in Nepal*, Robert Levy has greatly indebted students and scholars of South Asia. The work deals with the urban universe and its components of Hindus in the Newar town of Bhaktapur in Nepal’s Kathmandu Valley during the mid-seventies. It presents, in contrast to primarily philological and historical analyses, a structured account of the totality of a local form of Hinduism and, in my opinion, for the first time, a clear view of the intricate nature of the elements and their interrelations of a ‘medieval-type’ Hindu community.

*Mesocosm* successfully combines a well-informed textual and historical background, with anthropological observation and, as his earlier work—*Tahitians: Mind and experience in the Society Islands* (1973)—led us to expect, insightful analysis. It is often overlooked that the Hindu texts, whether in Sanskrit, Middle or New Indo-Aryan, or Dravidian, usually represent the voice of the Brāhmaṇ (the Buddhist, the Jaina, and so forth) establishment. Even originally counter-movements (Tantra, for example) made their way into the received texts only after a period of ‘Brāhmaṇization’—entailing purification and adjustment to the norms of Hinduism.

This book, however, presents Hinduism as it operates on the ground, from private beliefs to the city-wide Tantric religion, from private rituals to the public festivals of a whole realm, from individual sacred space in private houses to the sacred geography of the town of Bhaktapur and surrounding areas. It thus has intrinsic value not only for understanding local Newar Hinduism but also for the...
wider study and understanding of Hinduism in general.

ETERNAL HINDUISM?

There are several reasons, well known to specialists in Nepalese studies, for the choice of Bhaktapur and, consequently, for the value this study has in the understanding of traditional Hinduism. They include the 'museum' character of Bhaktapur, a very conservative town largely untempered by medieval Muslim and more recent British influences; a long history of some 2,000 years of Hindu life of the Newars, a people belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family; and the Newar stress on rituals and festivals as expression of their culture which has preserved a lot of older Hindu traits. We can, thus, for heuristic purposes, at least, take Bhaktapur Hinduism as a sample representation of 'medieval' Hinduism in a traditional monarchy and in an urban context (and not, significantly, in the usually studied village context where most anthropological accounts are based).

Another reason why this analysis is so important is that Mesocosm is, as I have said, a structured analysis. The usual, run-of-the-mill books on Hinduism are, as ethnologists would say, more or less 'thick' descriptions of the religion, with its festivals, customs, rites, beliefs. But such books often remain descriptive, sometimes to the extent of mere enumeration of features. They repeat, often ahistorically, the usual litany of the supposedly main concepts of Hinduism, such as the four āśramas and the four puruṣārthas.

Occasionally one can come across a good analysis of one or another aspect of Hindu life (marriage, death rituals, purity and pollution, the 'caste' system), but we normally miss in such books an incisive, in-depth analysis of the larger, integrating context of Hinduism and its worldview that goes beyond the common puruṣārtha and varnāśrama concepts. If we limit our viewpoint to the formal aspects of Hindu religion (worship, festivals, pūjā), then, again, there virtually is no single book which clearly delineates the structure, the variety, and the meaning of these rituals. I will concentrate on rituals and festivals for the purpose of this paper.

I am not of the opinion of those writers who maintain an eternal, essentially unchanging nature of Hinduism from Vedic times. Vedic religion cannot be compared directly with the Hinduism of the Great Epics, the various historical levels visible in the Purāṇas and in Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, Śāktism, and Tantrism—or the more informal local versions of Hinduism in towns and villages, from Srinagar and Kathmandu to Cochin and Jaffna and from Dwarka to Manipur.