

***Terra, Territorio e Società nel Mondo Indiano* edited by Daniela Berti and Gilles Tarabout. In *Etnosistemi*, Anno X, n. 10, Rome: CISU 2003. 155 pages, 18 figures, 27 plates, ISSN 1122-6234. [English edition forthcoming: *Land, Territory and Society in India*. Delhi: Manohar.]**

Reviewed by Chiara Letizia, Rome

From the 1980s onward, the social sciences began to reconsider the spatial dimension and to see political and cultural territory increasingly as “an inescapable notion in the human experience” and a “builder of identity, perhaps the most efficient of all” (J. Bonnemaïson and L. Cambrezy: *Le lien territorial, entre frontières et identités, Géographies et Cultures*, 20, 1995, pp. 7-18). The present volume on *Land, Territory and Society in the Indian world* lends support to this general development and challenges certain stereotypes concerning the notion of territory that circulate in the literature. Indeed, the main purpose of this collective work is to call into question the common stereotype, according to which neither territory as such nor territorial boundaries are relevant to Indian studies. Researchers of all disciplines (ethnology, history, Indology) have repeated this *cliché* and emphasized the “secondary character or the non-existence of the notion of territory in India”.

As the editors note, this widespread view acquired a theoretical expression in the statements of Dumont and Pocock, according to whom the territorial factor was a secondary one when considering India as a whole, whereas social organization, kinship and castes constituted primary factors (L. Dumont and D. Pocock: *For a sociology of India. Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 1, 1957, pp. 7-22.) Dumont did not deny the existence of the territorial factor; rather, he studied it carefully and was, paradoxically, one of the rare anthropologists to devote himself to this issue. However, his aim at finding a general structuring principle for the whole of Indian civilization made him subordinate the empirical level to the ideological level which, according to him, neglects the territorial factor. Despite all the criticism directed at Dumont, there was little discussion on this specific point. Berti and Tarabout stress that if the notion of territory in India has not been regarded as relevant until now, it is because research has been clinging to an ideal-type of territory, which corresponds to that of the modern nation-state.

Instead of denying all territorial logic to societies that do not conform to this model, the editors propose the adoption of a larger notion of territory, which also implies the notion of identity: “The notions of land and territory can also be seen as ways, very often connected, in which places are socially

defined, occupied or claimed, and influence or determine in a decisive manner different aspects of social life” (p. 4).

Reacting to the negation or neglect of the importance of territory in India, the present work intends to “show, through concrete and circumscribed cases, the importance of territory not only in the definition and regulation of social, political and religious relations in the Indian subcontinent, but also as a category having an explicit cognitive value, which is revealed as the subject of a symbolic activity, of discussions and representations” (p. 2). The book assembles contributions from researchers in a variety of disciplines (history of religions, anthropology and Indology), who work from different sources to provide an example of the plurality of symbolic utilizations of territory in the Indian world.

Three Sanskrit specialists open the volume with a study of texts from various epochs, thus adding a historical perspective.

Michel Angot discusses the notion of land and territory in the Vedic hymns and specifically in the treatises on sacrifice (Brāhmaṇa). He points out that the gods (*deva*), who do not inhabit fixed places and unceasingly travel through the vastness of space, are placed in opposition to all fixed and closed places which are attributed to demons (*asura*). Localization is thus devalued and stands in contrast with the positive value of travel and movement in an ideology that portrays, at the divine level, the values of a nomad society, and that constitutes the mythological counterpart to the mobility which characterizes Vedic ritual.

Gérard Colas analyses sources that are in direct contrast with the Vedic idea of wandering gods, and reveal, instead, settled divinities, well established in their temples, in the cities and villages. Epigraphic evidence from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries shows that the gods became physical entities active in human society to such an extent that the question of their legal status was raised for the administration of donations of landed property. Ritual handbooks of the Vaikhānasa, temple-priests of Viṣṇu, prescribe primarily donations to the priests, rather than directly to a divinity. A later Vaikhānasa manual, however, refers to the epigraphic formulation that addresses the donations to the god rather than to priests. Ritual, devotion and political power are intimately linked and, in this context, give rise to explicit, multiple and often contrasting discourses concerning territory.

Phyllis Granoff focuses on the role played by locality in the construction of religious identities in ancient and medieval India. She analyses texts of debates that illustrate the sectarian politics of medieval Śvetāmbara Jainism, as well as Buddhist inscriptions. While it is often assumed that the differences between the sects are essentially ritualistic in nature, and that the ritual details are used to distinguish one from another, in reality, according to these texts, the differences appear to be not religious, but rather territorial. Indeed, the rival groups are associated with geographical areas,

and this regional and linguistic tie is the principal "marker" of identity in that it determines the manner in which these religious groups view themselves and others.

Two ethnographic articles highlight the interaction between the land and its inhabitants.

Guenzi and Singh analyse the geomantic practices used by the astrologers of Benares in their divinatory consultations. They bring to light a reciprocal influence at work in the relationship between the territory and its inhabitants: the actions accomplished by men who turn the land into a "living" or "dead" land and, conversely, the influence the type of land inhabited can exert on human behaviour. The earth is not only a divinatory tool (one divines by means of the soil) but also an object of divination; one can cast the horoscope of parcels of land and territories. All these divinatory techniques applied to the study of the land reveal that territory is regarded as a "space for the collective sharing of a destiny" (p. 64).

Caroline and Filippo Osella study the methods used by inhabitants of Kerala to maximise auspiciousness within lands and buildings; they seek to establish harmony between the territory and the beings, living and dead, who dwell in and around the land. As can be concluded from the funeral practices, humans and the land mutually participate in the substance of the other. Life-cycle and paddy production stand in relation to one another – which is sometimes a relationship of similarity and sometimes one of opposition.

Two studies examine the relationship between kinship and territory.

Pier Giorgio Solinas' paper is devoted to the conflict between two rival factions in a Santal village of West Bengal. It demonstrates how the religious and social conflict manifests itself in terms of spatial division at the same time, resulting in what the author calls a "territorial schism": the faction provoking the split establishes its own temple with its priest, and the conflict becomes explicit with the creation of two separate religious territories.

Kinship is also central to the sole article dedicated to Nepal which, unlike India, has seen a great number of anthropologists address the theme of territory. Gérard Toffin highlights the social relevance of territory among the Newar of the Kathmandu valley. In his analysis of funeral associations – which play an essential role in the religious life and social organization of localities – and of local village divinities, he points out that the importance of territory for this ethnic group is even greater than that of blood links.

Finally, three contributions address the relationship between the religious and political dimensions of territory.

Gilles Tarabout's paper deals with the various types of territory that constituted the basis of the power relationships in 17<sup>th</sup> century Kerala, and with the changes that occurred during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The thesis

presented here is that the notion of territory (and even that of several superimposed territories) existed in Kerala well before the colonial period, and that consideration of this notion is essential to an understanding of the social organization and social dynamics of the period. In the long conflict between the kingdoms of Cochin and Travancore concerning the territory of a temple, one can observe the progressive transition from a multiplicity of territories of various categories – fragmented, embedded in one another and hierarchically ranked – to the notion of a unified, homogenous territory, characteristic of a modern State.

Daniela Berti examines the territorial dimension of the cults dedicated to the village divinities in the district of Kullu in Himachal Pradesh. Analysing the notion of *hār*, the jurisdiction of a god, she shows that the territorial factor is a criterion around which social, political and religious life is organized. The territory “far from being reduced to the ‘empirical’ level of social organisation, forms an integral part of the local discourse and serves as a theoretical or ‘ideological’ point of reference for behaviour and for ritual and religious practices” (p. 128). The strongly affirmed territorial dimension characterizing the cults of village gods explains the importance they were assigned by the various political powers that succeeded one another in the region. Each of these powers (Hindu kingdoms, British colonial administration, modern democratic State), without exception, attempted to adapt its respective political logics to those in operation in the territories of the gods.

Christiane Brosius, finally, analyses the way in which the notion of territory was used in India in propaganda videos prepared on the initiative of the militant Hindu Right in the late 1980s and early 1990s in order to create, elaborate and visualize their idea of “*hindutva*” (Indianness). These videos were produced for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the aftermath of the “patriotic pilgrimages” organized by this same party. Through the images and narratives of these territorial processions, a series of metaphors were created, linked with space, family and the body (the nation like a woman, the national territory like her body, the citizens like its devout sons). The videos reveal that the Hindu Right’s re-mapping strategies of Indianness constitute a partial fusion of various familiar spatial concepts and practices. Nationalist rhetoric produces a new cartography of the nation, calling upon religious traditions to transmit the idea of a national identity and to provide common denominators for the idea of Hindu superiority.

This book has first of all the merit of disproving a preconceived view in Indian studies, which has resulted in biased interpretation and the neglect of facts concerning the notion of territory. It also points the way for future studies and demonstrates that the analysis of representations linked to territory is essential to our understanding of the Indian societies of today and yesterday. The authors of this volume have made no attempt to show that there is only *one* specific Indian way of conceiving territory. On the

contrary, they have attempted to uncover several of them, and this will in turn facilitate comparison with other societies.

***Dancing the Self: Personhood and performance in the Pāṇḍav Līlā of Garhwal* by William S. Sax. New York: Oxford University Press 2002, ISBN 0-19-513815-1, pp. 224, 12 b&w plates, ink-drawings, bibl., index.**

Reviewed by Stuart Blackburn, London

Anyone who attempts a book about performance faces an uphill task, for writing about performance is a little like showing home movies to friends: what was so captivating when you first experienced it, is not so vivid when recycled to others. Ever since fieldworkers wrote up their descriptions of shamanic seances in Siberian cultures in the late nineteenth century, we have struggled to capture performances in print. But how can you reproduce the shimmering vitality of music and song, the dynamic motion of bodies and emotions on the cold page? Performance theory has always been bedevilled by this methodological problem. Some have tried to inject a sense of the live experience by using a special orthography for translations; some have used the “personal diary” approach. Some now include a CD of the event and/or a website link.

William Sax has not attempted any of these. Instead he has gritted his teeth and written a (more or less) conventional monograph, relying mainly on description, plus a good bit of translation and the occasional personal anecdote. But he too has attempted to close the gap between performance and its second-hand articulation, although not by any stylistic techniques. Rather he has done something more original and long overdue: he has tried to resolve the dichotomy by arguments within the book itself. And this is what distinguishes this book – an intellectual energy, which flows alongside the rich veins of ethnographic data. At times the energy is perhaps too free-flowing and runs away with itself; for one thing, the thesis of the book – that performance creates selves – is not entirely convincing. But when the writing is guided more closely by the author's deep knowledge of the performance tradition and its context, the observations ring true. Those insights are many and varied, so that, in the end, through this combination of explanatory ardour and local knowledge, the writing of the performance has been brought closer to the performance itself.