

The Pitfalls of Caste in the Wider Spectrum of Science: A Review of *Science and Religion in India: Beyond Disenchantment*

***Science and Religion in India: Beyond Disenchantment*. Renny Thomas. Routledge, 2021, 203p, Hardback, £120, Ebook, £29.59.**

Aashish Xaxa

Science and religion have traditionally been seen as two fundamentally polar fields. While religion has been posited as the domain of the cosmos, seemingly covering the arc of time from the creation of the universe till its ultimate demise, science has been the more stoic cousin, demanding a rigorous analysis of events based on a combination of empirical observations and theoretical analysis. Modern-day science can be seen as the descendent of the tumultuous socio-political-economic and scientific churning in 16th-century Europe during the Renaissance. It was one of the many ways in which the emerging educated class challenged the feudal order of the Church and kingdoms and the conservative dogma they had propagated as religion.

In the case of India, however, the distinctions are more blurred. The practice of science is often overshadowed by caste. The submissiveness of caste mutes the criticalness of science. This is often reflected in the practitioners of science in India, who often hail from the upper castes. It is in this context that Renny Thomas's book, *Science and Religion in India: Beyond Disenchantment* (2022, Routledge), makes an important intervention. Thomas takes an interesting and scantily used approach to make his point – an ethnography of labs. The book is divided into five chapters, and I will engage with them in the following paragraphs.

In the introduction, Thomas describes his methods, which primarily consist of ethnographic and archival research, as well as his central thesis: that the relationship between science and religion in India must be articulated in a language that transcends the binary of “conflict” and “complementarity.” However, “conflict” and “complementarity” are not the only categories that Thomas questions; despite gaining access to a research laboratory as part of an established scientist's research group at the institute, he does not become a complete “insider,” which is a crucial requirement of being an ethnographer.

The first chapter of the book tells the story of modern science in postcolonial India, beginning with Nehru's uncritical acceptance of science as a vehicle for modernity. Thomas points to a critical image from the Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research (JNCASR), a marble stone with the inscription “I, too, have worshipped at the shrine of science” by Nehru. Through his historiography, Thomas tells the story of how science becomes a state ideology and how instilling scientific temper becomes a “legal obligation” with the 42nd Amendment to the Indian constitution (1976). What is crucial in this history is the confluence of rationality and science, where the scientific method was depicted as “the only way to enter into the universal identity of a rational being” (Thomas 35).

In Chapters 2 and 3, Thomas assesses the complexities of scientists' religious lives. We meet Raja Ramanna and CNR Rao, two distinguished scientists from the upper castes who have both expressed their faith publicly. Thomas, for example, quotes Rao as saying, “It is essential to pray in order to have a definite way of life, guidelines for ourselves, and to live harmoniously in this world” (as quoted by Thomas 53). Religion appears to define the limits of scientific inquiry and to apply ethical constraints to the life of a scientist in this context; religion thus complements scientific practice. However, as previously stated, the discussion transcends either conflict or complementarity as we are introduced to narratives from several other scientists at the institute. It is important to highlight here that had the scientists been of a lower caste, their open proclamation of religion would have been seen as a sign of weakness

and unscientific. Further on, we meet MR Iyer, who disproves the notion that science is primarily a professional practice while religion is a personal one. We are also introduced to Vishnuvardhan, a believer who believes that science is not the only way to approach and comprehend reality. Many of these stories repeat the scientist's belief that proving the existence of God is unnecessary. Is this an indication that these scientists are not rational enough, or is it an attempt to rationalise the coexistence of at least two different selves - one of the scientist and the other of the believer?

We get a hint of the answer in Chapter 3 when Thomas introduces us to the concept of the "scientist-believer," which essentially breaks the artificial boundary between the two hypothetical selves mentioned above. This unique relationship becomes concrete through the unique geographies of prayer where certain scholars mention that the sanctum sanctorum of temples is not visited or prayed for rituals. In addition, Thomas's ethnography reveals how some scholars translate acts of faith - such as fasting - into science. It is here that Thomas warns us of the Brahminical undercurrents of these stories; According to Thomas, certain Hindu Brahmin religious practices are framed as "cultural," while practices of other religions are framed as "religious." This articulation universalises certain Hindu Brahmin rituals into the general "culture" of the land – something that Thomas makes the reader wary about and further highlights how science gets subverted due to caste and the mechanical nature of Brahmanism.

Chapter 4 examines the lives of scientists who consider themselves atheists, agnostics, or materialists. But this disbelief is not divorced from a "religious or cultural atmosphere," where even non-religious scientists continue their sacred thread and practice fervent vegetarianism (rationalising the practice as scientific again). Atheism is again expressed through geography and architecture; For example, the case of scientist Rajiv presents how every activity has a special place, and scientific institutions are places of scientific research. We are also introduced to several non-believing scholars who continue to visit the temples, which they claim they do for architectural appreciation rather than religious belief. This expression depoliticises temple participation by allowing non-believing scholars to exist within the religious and cultural ethos without harming them as well.

Chapter 5 of the book is probably the most critical section of the book, in my opinion. It contextualises Thomas' insights into the pervasive lived reality of caste. In this chapter, Thomas shows how caste shapes the construction of science as a "meritorious and neutral category" (138) while positing that Brahmins are the natural heirs of scientific knowledge. In addition, the chapter also discusses the caste life of the Brahmin scholars expressed through institutionalised vegetarianism, the construction of non-Brahmins as impatient and profit-seeking, and the knowledge of the Vedas, classical music, and dance, which is the cultural capital that distinguishes Brahmin scientists from the non-Brahmins. Thomas also points out how a Dalit/Bahujan vs. the casteless binary form is created in the research facility where Brahminic scientists deny caste and caste privileges with the language of "merit" and effectively become "casteless" in their own imagination. Thomas's book shows that this imagination is not an isolated occurrence in a "prestigious" research institution but a defining feature of modern scholarship in postcolonial India, which is very tragic and infuriating in its assessment.

At once, my critique and praise of the book are that it is a dense ethnographic work. This may hamper the accessibility of some crucial points that Thomas makes as he removes the blinders from the intersection of science and caste. Maybe in the second edition, Thomas can trim down on the denser part of the ethnography and focus more on how caste subverts science in major scientific spaces in India. Nonetheless, the book needs to be read as it puts a new spin on the classic positivist characteristic of science, this time in the Indian context. That is the bane of caste, which ultimately needs to be annihilated.

Aashish Xaxa
Assistant Professor
IIT Gandhinagar
aashish.xaxa@iitgn.ac.in

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