
H-France Review Vol. 22 (October 2022), No. 178

Natalie Lang, *Religion and Pride: Hindus in Search of Recognition in La Réunion*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2021. 234 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$135.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-80073-027-4; \$34.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-80073-028-1.

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Natalie Lang's *Religion and Pride* is an essential contribution to the study of religious communities of South Asian descent born of the system of indentured labor. This monograph deserves to be at the vanguard of this study area's under-researched subfield, Indo-descendant communities in non-anglophone (former) plantation societies, particularly the *départements d'Outre-mer* ("Overseas Departments") under French territorial authority.

As a source of affect and politics, pride is omnipresent in the self-understanding of La Réunion's Hindu community. From internal (ceremonies, sermons, temple education) to external audiences (audiovisual media, political meetings, tourism), the notion of restorative *fierté* is often the nodal subject of communication. Christian Barat, Gerry L'Étang, Jean Benoist, Christian Ghasarian, Florence Callandre, Mathieu Claveyrolas, and Lou Kermarrec all include religious pride, dignity, or honor as discursive responses to the marginalization of Hindu cults under colonial rule and Catholic dominance.[1] Through extensive fieldwork and an anthropological lens, Lang's work is the first to analyze the political and ritual centrality of this emotion. In its Reunionese context, she considers pride "a justified form of self-esteem" (p. 1). Reunionese pride is a form of *fierté*, a legitimate strength distinguished from *orgueil*, conceited pride.

The monograph's main arguments are the following. Once considered bearers of an alien and sorcerous religion, Reunionese Hindu worshippers strive for an active and official recognition in their homeland, from non-Hindu neighbors to public authorities. Lang comprehensively details the affective rhetoric of this process, through which common and individual theological knowledge asserts equality with other Reunionese religions and rejects the past's shame of spiritual poverty. The introduction sharply stresses the aspirational and strategic nature of this pride, contextualizing Hindu assertion across the social mobility of the Indo-Reunionese community. Lang insists that this aspiration goes beyond class elevation and details how Hindu worshippers claiming a higher spiritual status often evade financial and material constraints. This argument complicates the received knowledge that Reunionese Hindu orthopraxy has been motivated by the desire to emulate India and the neighboring island of Mauritius. According to this received knowledge, an aspirational cultural work is limited to the social elites able to travel and import the material needed for more conventional worship. Lang privileges the importance

of the local context's decisive nature, wherein original aesthetic and ritual negotiations take root. The discourse of pride permanently mediates such negotiations.

Chapter one maps the history and geography of Reunionese Hindu worship. It advocates the relative irrelevance of subcontinental religious formations in the colonial evolution of a Reunionese Hindu community. Lang stresses the role played by the French colonial assimilation impetus, through conversion to Catholicism and *métissage*. Having historically faced disappearance through assimilation, this postcolonial Hindu assertion appears like a necessary answer. This choice is negotiable. While the normative dominance of Catholicism is rejected, many worshippers do not necessarily abandon Catholic votive and sacramental allegiances. *Métissage* is overall accepted as an unavoidable component of Reunionese identity, though it can still layer exclusive sediments of caste and racial hierarchies. The chapter introduces the deities, rituals, and institutional forces at work in La Réunion, insisting on their roots in Tamil village cults (*Kavadi* hook-piercing, *Timiti* walk on fire) and deities (Mariamman, Draupadi, Madurai Viran). This foundational non-elite religiosity attracted prejudice, the most salient one being the accusation of sorcery. Lang shows how Reunionese Hindus feel cornered by the gaze of Indian and Mauritian clerical authorities, the Reunionese Catholic Church, and their non-Hindu neighbors, hence turning to a rhetoric of valorization.

Chapter two brilliantly reflects on Reunionese Hindu self-perception as a religious minority, towards a once-dominant Catholic landscape and the political powers reinforcing Republican *laïcité*. Lang argues that this positional standing is dependent on the religious communities' associative fabric, through temple committees and religious syndication. Lang sees it as pride politics and makes a strong case for the fundamental role of pride for politicians platforming an honorable status through religious instruction, media outreach, and claims across public space. Lang stresses how useful the framework of French *laïcité* can be to them, understood in La Réunion as the harmonious cohabitation of different religious groups, instead of the more confrontational politics of metropolitan France. Associative leaders turn to the local state and invoke its *laïcité* to publicly assert their presence, as well as their equality with Christianity and Islam. Lang uses as a telling example the unsuccessful demand for state recognition of a Hindu public holiday. Nonetheless, the granted mediation of public authorities in ritual and cultural events, such as *Kavadi* processions and the Tamil New Year, has anchored Hindu religiosity as a cornerstone of Reunionese self-understanding. The active televisual mediatization of Hindu worship validates a demand of inclusion and recognition, which furthermore grants a sense of equity in a multireligious society.

Chapter three centers on the relation of current Reunionese Hinduism with India, historically understood as a model of orthopraxy. The chapter offers a deep analysis of diasporic consciousness's multipolarity against binaries and hierarchies. The interviewed temple-goers consciously straddle "big," vegetarian, India-centric ritual spaces and "low" local and non-elite institutions wherein sacrificial worship and village deities remain the norm. Lang shows how difficult it is for Reunionese Hindus to reject Indo-centric consciousness in their will to attain ritual distinction. India remains overall the locus of an enviable knowledge. Reunionese worshippers who claim disregard for India often invoke first local ritual allegiances, but can overturn this rhetoric when needed. These complex dynamics are crucially exemplified Lang's interaction with Marco. Marco—a Reunionese Hindu priest—views India primarily as the country of the Mahabharata and visits the celebrated pilgrimage centers of Tamilnadu. Yet, his visits to Tamil village temples capture the origins of his own Reunionese worship and justify their

authenticity because of their presence in India. As Lang concludes, “Reunionese Hindus can claim pride both in newly created diasporic consciousness and in the appreciation of specific Reunionese Hindu practices. Thus, regardless of its relation to India, Hindu religion can be a source of pride” (p. 110).

Chapter four focuses on the notion of knowledge as a main source of religious dignity and status. Lang documents the ways Reunionese worshippers turn ritual and theological knowledge into a quest. Lang makes a very compelling argument: For Reunionese Hindus, spiritual aspiration is beyond mere cultural capital. The claim to have deep religious knowledge is a transcending form of distinction, beyond class and material limitations. As the author shows, proud knowledge builds bridges. Like in priest Paul’s conscious, educated use of both Sanskritic and Catholic terms to explain Hindu rituals, articulating *en passant* an argument for Reunionese Hinduism’s inherent tolerance. Theological erudition and ritual mastery are sources of authority for worshippers; by association, it turns into pride. Lang insists that this reliance on priestly knowledge is conditioned by gender and class. Reunionese clergy is all-male and tied to socially mobile if not intermediary professions (agriculture, construction, transportation). This allows “well-functioning systems of social, political and economic relations” (p. 120), wherein priests bridge elites and non-elites, vegetarian and sacrificial worship, La Réunion, India, and Mauritius. The pride in knowledge is self-sufficient, as with the priest Marco’s self-contentment in his awareness of the orthodox Agama corpus, though he himself chooses to put it in application only partially. Lang argues for the central importance of social media—mainly Facebook—as an effective vector of Reunionese Hindu pride. It is the chosen medium of priests to advertise their work and also socialize with Indian or Mauritian colleagues. To display textual, ritual, and sartorial knowledge is the starting point of this communication. Facebook allows Hindu women to reclaim this plural display to assert their pride, knowledge, and dignity as temple-goers. As Lang shows, it allows them to platform presence and power as knowledge-bearers in their own right without challenging the patriarchal order of the temple.

Chapter five documents the way devotional choices blur if not challenge institutional dichotomies between “high” and “low” worship, religion and “magic.” As in the case of the millennial woman Lakshmi’s affirmed adherence to Hindu and Catholic ritual duties, Lang stresses that a plural religious life is first and foremost “a way to attain different and specific aims” rather than institutional obedience (p. 142). This plurality follows the will to honor different ancestral origins, remediating social anxieties due to material changes. Overall, these choices remain forms of distinction affirming practical spiritual knowledge. Lang specifies the limits of religious *vivre-ensemble*, describing the rare and difficult Hindu involvement with Muslim and Afro-Malagasy traditions. The choice of animal sacrifice is a divisive topic in La Réunion, requiring care in research. Lang’s argument is outstanding: ritual intention trumps orthopractic considerations, as sacrifice often remedies urgent health and financial concerns. Moreover, as a costly and public event, animal sacrifice is *in fine* a strong marker of social distinction.

Chapter six opens up the book’s argument on the constitutive pride of Reunionese Hindu worship. According to Lang, aesthetic choices and emotional display guide overall ritual inclinations. Following Mahmood, she shows how emotions become ritualized “projects.”^[2] First, efforts put into public penances become motivational motors in all life choices. Heavily sensorial rites like the *Kavadi* and the *Timiti* are built on ritually framed moods, such as the use of specific drumming practices. Lang concludes her chapter with a nuanced study of the importance of “taste” in ritual life. For Reunionese Hindus, the recognition and display of

aesthetic standards is a key vector of pride. This aesthetic capacity indicates the depth of religious know-how. Proper fashion and ritual ornamentation are the most common displays. Lang analyzes the role of Facebook for pride politicians. Being itself a mark of social capital, Facebook is used by priests to develop diasporic networks, but also by female worshippers to assert their belonging to the temple universe and its codes. It is nonetheless a “balanced pride,” as this assertion of ritual duty does not challenge the phallographic rules of the Hindu Reunionese temple (p. 188).

Religion and Pride fills many bibliographic gaps. The central argument on emotional politics, as well as her analysis of the role of social media, deserve to be key references for further research on diasporic South Asian religiosity. Lang’s interviews provide a representative spectrum of Hindu diversity in Reunion Island, in terms of gender, background, and class. The reader apprehends the extent to which pride is a common force across this ritual spectrum, from an attachment to Creole pluri-rituality to more orthopractic allegiances. In its observations and conclusions, this is a work of great comparative relevance for scholars of Hindu worship in other French overseas departments (Guadeloupe, Martinique). Lang’s view of pride politics is furthermore relevant to most societies shaped by the tense history of indenture, even in countries (Mauritius, Guyana) where Indo-descendants form the demographic majority and dominant groups.

Religion and Pride is also a useful work of reference for the study of French *laïcité* and its imperially rooted antagonism with religious expression. The Reunionese context of the book is an invitation to understand the local and complex ways Reunionese Hindus, as French citizens, negotiate with and deploy the rhetoric of *laïcité* towards religious ends. Through the mediation of Hindu associations, the book shows how these negotiations are not peripheral accommodations. They make La Réunion the center of original *laïcité* politics validated by the French State. The political actors and worshippers introduced by Lang represent an active, decisive, and sometimes vindictive form of political agency through both *laïcité à la française* and its traditional antithesis, public religiosity.

As an anthropological study, *Religion and Pride’s* great strength lies in its committed empathy to Reunionese Hindus and their social aspirations against discourses of Creole Christian normativity. Nonetheless, the book could have pushed further its incisive look into religious politics.

First, on the topic of pride itself, Lang convincingly argues that the articulation is *fierté* and not *orgueil*, based upon a refusal of shame and a claim to respectability. Some of the interviewed worshippers’ spiritual sources of pride (ancientness of the religion, preference for vegetarian worship) can, however, be seen as oppositional to their neighbors’ religious traditions. These fault lines and tensions are—briefly yet aptly—described in chapter five. Without constituting a form of *orgueil*, diasporic Hindu pride can defend a sense of Brahmanical superiority. In the introduction, Lang states that “Reunionese Hindus claims of pride do not have any institutional link to movements outside the island either” (p. 13). This affirmation is puzzling, considering the large presence of Brahmanically-minded Indian and Mauritian priests in La Réunion. Both in India and Mauritius, this clerical elite is strongly rooted in Hindutvavadi allegiances. Additionally, Reunionese associative elites (*Fédération des temples tamouls*, *Tamij Sangam*) have established perennial bridges with the Tamil Hindu institutions and the Indian State. Lastly, on the issue of pride, *Religion and Pride* could have nuanced the views expressed by Hindu

worshippers on a past antagonism between Catholicism and Hinduism. Though this conflictual vision is certainly felt today (and fueled by the institutions), Céline Ramsamy-Giancione's comprehensive historicization of Indian conversion in La Réunion challenges a postcolonial narrative of persecution.[3]

To finish, the presence of caste could have been more researched. In the introduction, Lang states that she “witnessed very little evidence of caste during [her] fieldwork” (p. 10). Few Reunionese Hindus identify publicly with a caste lineage. Yet family names and deities are often caste signifiers and therefore do constitute historical evidence even if their bearers no longer associate with the codification. Furthermore, caste does not manifest itself only in group endogamy and social conflict, it also indexes worldviews. The notion of correct “knowledge,” opposed to ignorance, is a deeply Brahmanical framework. If caste groups are not invoked anymore, the logic of casteism feels very much at work in what Lang refers to as ritual purity rules, or the consciousness of a division between “low” and “high” worship. As Ambedkarite scholarship (Ambedkar, Omvedt, and Ilaiyah [4]) argues, Hinduism—as a modern religious construct—and caste are inseparable, as much as the imperatives of a Brahmanical polity are hardly escapable. If the complexity of diasporic contexts like La Réunion's can challenge this assertion, a researched answer requires a more thorough investigation of casteist politics and lexicons, beyond common claims that one's ancestral caste has been forgotten.

To conclude, Natalie Lang's *Religion and Pride* remains a remarkably comprehensive, instructive, and ground-shifting monograph. Rigorous fieldwork and ethical care guide both questions and answers. The monograph deserves to be a must-read for anyone with an interest in South Asian religions, diasporic societies, postcolonial France, Reunion Island, or the Indian Ocean. Lang offers a deeply immersive entry point into Reunionese Hinduism. Her multifocal interrogation of ritual diversity—collective or individual—reflects faithfully the kaleidoscopic nature of Reunionese religiosity.

NOTES

[1] See Christian Barat, *Nargoulan. Culture et rites malbars à la Réunion. Approche anthropologique* (Saint-Denis: Éditions du Trémil, 1989); Gerry L'Etang, *La Grâce, le sacrifice et l'oracle. De l'Inde à la Martinique, les avatars de l'Hindouisme* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 1997); Jean Benoist, *Hinduismes créoles. Mascareignes, Antilles* (Paris: Éditions du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 1998); Christian Ghasarian, *Honneur, chance et destin. La culture indienne à La Réunion* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1991); Florence Callandre, *Koylou. Représentation divine et architecture sacrée de l'hindouisme réunionnais, 1990-1998, 2^e ed.* (Saint-André: Océan éditions, 2009); Mathieu Claveyrolas, *Quand l'hindouisme est créole. Plantation et indianité à l'île Maurice* (Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS, 2017); Lou Kermarrec, “Le paysage végétal et les hindouistes des Antilles (Guadeloupe) et des Mascareignes (La Réunion, île Maurice). Ethnographie d'une circulation des pratiques religieuses,” *Archives des sciences sociales des religions* 197 (2022): 83-112.

[2] Saba Mahmood, “Rehearsed Spontaneity and the Conventionality of Ritual: Disciplines of ‘Salat’,” *American Ethnologist* 28 (2001): 827-853.

[3] Céline Ramsamy-Giancione, “Catholicisme et hindouisme populaire à l'île de La Réunion. Contacts, échanges (milieu du XIXe-début du XXe siècle),” (Ph.D. dissertation, Université de la Réunion, 2018).

[4] Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (New Delhi: Critical Quest 2007) and *Riddles in Hinduism: An Exposition to Enlighten the Masses* (New Delhi: Navayana Press, 2018); Gail Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals* (New Delhi: Navayana Press, 2008); Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not A Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Samya, 2001).

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ISSN 1553-9172