Introductory Essay for Special Theme

The Gift of Imagining/Creating Society: A Case Study of Contemporary Indian Religions

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Purpose of This Special Theme

How do humans create society? This question was analyzed by Marcel Mauss, who focused on the concept of the gift. According to Mauss, the gift embodies the spiritual essence of the giver, and because it compels the recipient to return the gift, an obligatory exchange of giving and returning occurs. Mauss argues that this reciprocal exchange is a critical means of creating social solidarity, of creating society itself, and is the wisdom of humans for avoiding war. Implicit in this argument was a critique of a market society that does not bring about a personable relationship (Mauss 2001(1925)).

This special theme follows Mauss in attempting to elucidate the socially creative power of giving, using Indian religions as a case study. However, the act of giving in Indian religions does not fit neatly into Mauss’s theory of giving. This awkward fit is because they have developed norms that reject the reciprocal obligation that Mauss
The Gift of Imagining/Creating Society points out. Giving in Indian religions has been highly theorized by concepts such as “dāna”, “sevā”, and “bhakti”. The emphasis is on refusing to return gifts and being freed from the logic of gift exchange. In this way, giving in Indian religions is guided by norms distinct from those of reciprocity. Therefore, the act of giving in this context does not aspire to a society based on reciprocal solidarity in the sense that Mauss suggests. What kind of society, then, does the gift of Indian religion create? This question is the starting point of the present special theme. This special theme examines the question by taking the cases of India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar as examples, aiming to contribute to the anthropological debate on the socially creative power of giving.

Viewpoint of This Special Theme

Research on Indian religious gift-giving began in earnest in the 1980s. The major trend is to formulate the concept of “pure gift” for Indian religions and to contrast it with what Mauss calls reciprocal giving (e.g. Parry 1986; Trautmann 2017(1982)). According to these studies, pure giving forms a social structure based on the asymmetry between transcendent or supramundane beings (gods, monks, and so on) and ordinary people (e.g. Heim 2004; Laidlaw 2000; Strenski 1983). However, these studies are problematic because they (1) limit themselves too much to the customary and ritual gifts of ordinary people, and (2) are too concerned with the question of the “quid pro quo” of giving.

In contrast, since the 2000s, a hermeneutic approach has become predominant. In other words, against the backdrop of value pluralism in contemporary society, research has emerged that focuses on the ethics of giving, or rather, on the actors who make the “rightness or wrongness” of giving an issue. These studies reimagine the gift as an
“ethical act”, while placing the gift in a broader political and social context than the realm of religion (ex. Bornstein 2012; Copeman 2009).

However, these studies has tended to perceive religious giving as a self-cultivating practice undertaken in pursuit of “goodness,” and its aspect as a social act that creates actual social relations while keeping in mind the ideal social relations has not been fully understood. In this special theme, therefore, while continuing the recent research trend that regards giving as an ethical act, we also pay attention to the social aspect of giving. How do the gifts of Indian religions mediate social relations and actions, and create society in the present age of diverse values? This is the core question of this special theme.

How, then, do we describe the creation of society? In this regard, this special theme follows David Graeber in focusing on the “imagination” that makes the gift possible. Based on Karl Marx’s discussion of the importance of imagination as a precondition for revolution, Graeber emphasizes how “imagination” plays a practical and essential role in reproducing the social relations that make our lives worth living and meaningful (Graeber 2001; 2015). The imagined society makes sense of and guides the gift as a kind of potential force. It transforms actual inter-personal relations and creates society in so doing. In other words, without the imagining society, the creation of society would not be possible. Therefore, this special theme aims to clarify the socially imaginative/creative power of religious gift-giving by viewing it as an innovative and constructive social act that aspires to an uncertain future in a concrete historical and social context.

Significance of This Special Theme

What is the significance of this special theme? Primarily, this
special theme is a study of Indian religions, revealing key aspects of Indian, Sri Lankan, and Myanmar societies. At present, religious norms are being applied to contexts beyond their traditional confines. Therefore, our insights will have important implications for understanding the transformation of these societies. The contributions made in this special theme may also provide critical information for considering the gifts of other institutional religions that, like Indian religions, utilize the device of asymmetrical giving.

However, this special theme also contemplates a contribution to the study of gift-giving in anthropology in general. In the past, Karl Polanyi understood the two World Wars as a consequence of marketization that made even the inherently untradeable (labor, land, money, etc.) a commodity (Polanyi 2014). Like Mauss himself, there is an aspect of gift studies that tries to discover some hope against the marketization that appears to envelop the world. In the words of the historian Valentin Groebner, to speak of gifts is to point to an ideal, “to speak of utopia” (Groebner 2002: 157). Nonetheless, the principle paradox that every act of giving can easily be turned into an exchange comes into play. In this context, what kind of society can we imagine? In what way can we imagine a society in which we can share our abilities and resources with others, and receive from others the abilities and resources we lack?

Our study attempts to empirically clarify this ethical question by focusing on the imagination evoked by religious norms. Institutional religions (hegemonic religions), including Indian religions, have always been the antithesis of the market society (Parry 1996). They also have the potential to imagine other worlds and create a kind of liberating space (Graeber 2011; Bloch 2008). As we have seen, in prior research, the gift of Indian religions has long been viewed in terms of the concept of “pure gift”. This concept is an ideal, and it is
not directly applicable to reality. That is to say, the understanding of the gift of Indian religion as a “pure gift” is too idealistic. Yet, there is a embedded mode of how we should act and relate to others. Herein lies the potential power of religious norms.

Hence in this special theme, we will analyze the specific ways in which this potential is developed in the context of each case. What is first revealed is how society and new values are imagined and real gifts are imbued with meaning through the mediation of religious norms. Second, how the gift works creatively on real social relations in this process. Third, how religious norms themselves are transformed as society is imagined/created through the gift.

It is only the limited issue of the gift of Indian religions that will be examined in this special theme. It can, however, be seen as a response to the universal question of how to imagine/create a society in a regional context. It is not a utopia, as the papers in this special theme make clear. But each article shows through its own case study the fertile potential of giving. Therefore, clarifying the reality of the situation can be an important case study in considering the question of what kind of connections can be aimed at and realized in the present day of social fragmentation at various levels under the COVID-19 crisis.

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