



Johannes Quack. *Disenchanted India: Organized Rationalism and Criticism of Religion in India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xvii + 362 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-981260-8; \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-981262-2.

Reviewed by Dilip Simeon (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-Asia (November, 2012)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha



## Rationalism and Religion in India

On March 10, 2012, Sanal Edamaruku, president of the Indian Rationalist Association, inspected a crucifix in front of a suburban church in Mumbai. The crucifix had attracted hundreds of devotees on account of droplets of water trickling from Jesus's feet. Edamaruku identified the source of the water (a drainage near a washing room) and the capillary action whereby it reached Jesus's feet. Later, in a live TV program he explained his findings and accused church officials of miracle mongering. A heated debate began, in which priests demanded an apology. Upon his refusal, the police charged him under section 295 of the Indian Penal Code for hurting religious sentiments.[1]

This book is an account of the broader rationalist movement in India of which Edamaruku is a prominent member, and a vivid description of its origins, practices, and beliefs. A monograph on the radical avowal of scientific reason, it fills a much-needed lacuna in the annals of modern India. The clubbing together of reason and science is, of course, a problem in itself, one that the narrative enables the reader to discern. Borrowing partly from Charles Taylor's book *A Secular Age* (2007), the author coins the term "modes of unbelief" to refer to the rationalists' questioning of India's endemic religiosity.

The story of Indian rationalism has an illustrious cast in Johannes Quack's telling. It includes Jotiba Phule, Ganesh G. Agarkar, Shahu Maharaj, Annie Besant, Ramaswami Naicker, Jawaharlal Nehru, Bhimrao Ambed-

kar, M. N. Roy, Goparaju Rao "Gora," C. N. Annadurai, and a host of others. Much of the activism that the study focuses on derives inspiration from Phule's radical anti-caste movement, the Satyashodhak Samaj, because an important dimension of organized rationalism was and remains the challenge to sacralized social injustice. The roots of this challenge lie in diverse intellectual currents, such as the Bengal Renaissance, and the religious and social reform movements of Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu and Maharashtra. Rationalists trace their roots to ancient Indian materialism and the medieval *Bhakti* movement—this claim is counter to the traditionalist charge that reformers were westernizers and intellectual slaves.

Many Indian rationalists were strongly influenced by Western intellectuals, such as the nineteenth-century American thinkers Robert Ingersoll and George Holyoake. They also had personal ties with such figures as Charles Bradlaugh, British Member of Parliament his ally Besant (who played a strong role in propagating rationalism in India before she became a Theosophist). Organizational links were established early on with the English Rationalist Press Association (RPA), whose publications had great influence and encouraged the advent of Indian journals, such as the Anglo-Tamil *Philosophic Inquirer* and *Free Thought*. Organized rationalism dates from the founding of the Rationalist Association of India in Bombay (1930) that merged with the Indian Rationalist Association in 1950. The latter body was founded in 1949, with a leading role being played by

R. P. Paranjpe, a former vice chancellor of Bombay University. Among its members were Annadurai (sixteenth chief minister of Tamilnadu) and the well-known maverick ex-Communist Roy. Even though not all of these personages remained within the loosely defined doctrinal fold of rationalism, all of them contributed to the propagation of what came to be defined in the Indian constitution as a “scientific temper.”

The core of the book is an ethnographic study of the Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti (Organization for the Eradication of Superstition, ANiS, better known in the province of Maharashtra as MANS). Established in the late 1980s, it was, describes Quack, one of the most active rationalist organizations in India. ANiS has branches in most districts in Maharashtra; publishes monthly magazines; and conducts regular programs in schools, colleges, and villages to combat superstition and to educate people on matters pertaining to sex, the environment, addiction, and black magic. Led by ANiS, rationalists in Maharashtra have also initiated an anti-superstition bill that has been approved by the cabinet five times but not yet passed into law. (Quack errs in stating that it was passed in the legislative assembly in 2005 [p. 13]).

The book undertakes an in-depth study of ANiS, examining its organizational structure and practices. The relevant section begins with extensive interviews with its president, Dr. Narayan Dabholkar, who also edits the respected Marathi weekly, *Sadhana*. ANiS’s approach—representative of a broad range of Indian rationalists—amounts to an ideology of humanism, and is exemplified in a statement made by one of its activists: “The task is to link humanism, rationalism, atheism, science, and the fruits of science—that is technology—the scientific temper and the power of reason, in order to live a happy and fulfilling life, both emotionally and physically” (p. 12). Chapter 13 contains an account of what rationalism means to its various proponents. The account in this section evokes interesting tensions on matters of accommodation to astrology and Ayurveda.

The author discerns that ANiS’s and Dabholkar’s “position with respect to religion grew less confrontational over the years” and that its main critical focus was on superstition and the misuse of religion to exploit people (p. 187). Thus, Dabholkar avers that “the caste system is the oldest superstition of mankind,” and Edamaruku describes superstition as a kind of enforcement of ignorance (p. 185). Quack includes some small sketches of other agnostic intellectuals, such as Gogineni Babu, former director of the International Humanist and Ethical

Union, who in an interview with Quack, cited art and music as exemplars of a spirituality without religion. We also come across philosophical problems posed by scientists holding apparently irrational beliefs and indulging in religious rituals and practices. Quack cites, for example, the late A. K. Ramanujan’s remembrance of his father, the astronomer Srinivas Ramanujan, who along with his scientific work, also practiced astrology, held on to caste rituals, and reminded his son that the brain has two lobes.

The author makes an effort to understand the personal motivations of ANiS activists. An interesting observation is that their most characteristic stance lies in seeing rationalism as “primarily a moral category.” Social justice is seen as accompanying rationality. Thus, the activist Sushila Munde asked him: “can any rational person say: I believe in injustice?” In another interview, Vandana Shinde stressed that nonviolence was part of rationalism, which for her meant “to avoid violence and to try to find the truth” (p. 215).

The rationalist movement and its efforts to dispel superstition have been the source of controversy. Hindu nationalist groups have attacked them (and this includes attempts at physical disruption of their events) for undermining Hindu culture and hurting Hindu sentiments. Others have criticized the anti-superstition bill for attempting to deprive ordinary people of a rich source of traditional healing practices.

The book is a rich source of information about what may be called the progressivist spectrum of Indian thought—along the way providing the reader with references to theoretical studies of secular modernity and enlightenment rationality. These include Max Weber’s concept of disenchantment and more recent work by Taylor, Ashis Nandy, and Gyan Prakash, among others. We gain access to material about and Web links to rationalist groups across India, and not just in Maharashtra. It provides the reader with food for thought on complex questions, such as the relation between the aspiration for social justice on the one hand and the struggle for rational thought on the other. In India it was never a straightforward battle between science and organized religion. Rather, in the words of G. Vijayan, head of the Atheist Centre: “In India we find that the conflict is between religion and social reform. In India we find philosophical freedom on the one side and social ostracism on the other” (p. 53). The narrative is engaging and full of ethnographic detail about personal dilemmas, doctrinal conflicts, and rationalist performances. *Disenchant-*

*ing India* is a major contribution to and entry point for the study of complex and long-standing problems of Indian society.

Note

[1]. For press reports and developments in this case, see <http://dilipsimeon.blogspot.com/2012/05/>

[praveen-swami-indias-god-laws-fail-test.html](http://praveen-swami-indias-god-laws-fail-test.html) (accessed November 13, 2012).

Dilip Simeon is author of a novel about Maoism in India, *Revolution Highway* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2010) and *The Politics of Labour under Late Colonialism: Workers, Trade Unions and the State in Chota Nagpur, 1928-1939* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1995).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

**Citation:** Dilip Simeon. Review of Quack, Johannes, *Disenchanted India: Organized Rationalism and Criticism of Religion in India*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34722>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.