Poverty and the Quest for Life: Spiritual and Material Striving in Rural India by Bhrigupati Singh.


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When Giorgio Agamben (1998) put forth the notion of “bare life,” a concept demarcating expendable forms of being that lie at the heart of modern power, anthropologists responded critically and concertedly. A wealth of renewed attention has been focused onto sovereign powers and the politics of life itself. In his debut ethnography, Poverty and the Quest for Life, Bhrigupati Singh makes profound contributions to this area of study.

Singh conducted his field research in Rajasthan, India with Sahariya tribe members, people overwhelmingly characterized as living in “unthinkable” poverty. With his ethnographic insights, Singh mounts a sustained inquiry into what it might mean to conceive of “quality of life” beyond normative indicators, such as caloric intake and consumption expenditure. “The most important qualities of life cannot be counted,” writes Singh (97). Far more than just an uplifting moral platitude, this statement provides an entry point into Singh’s overarching ambition: to develop an analytic view of power and ethics that sees beyond material lack to find “waxing” and “waning” vitalities that transcend binaries through the monist ontologies of Giles Deleuze (2001) and Friedrich Nietzsche (2003, 2009, 2013). Singh follows the monist rejection of dualisms and discrete quantities in favor of a view of singular but agonistic forces, in order to suggest that the abstracted indicators and measurements of impoverishment need to be understood in their fundamental relationship to other abundances.

That is, he responds to work within postcolonial studies that has problematized the secularizing assumptions of Western historiography (see Chakrabarty 2007), while at the same time embodying his arguments regarding the connections between many modes of life at different thresholds. This stance segues into the first two of eleven chapters, which are primarily focused on laying out a “political theology of sovereignty” (55). In the
In the second chapter, Singh reimagines Michel Foucault’s (2010) framework of governmentality and revises how to think of the state, state failure, and the art of governing. Rather than looking dichotomously at the unintended consequences of state development projects where failures produce state violence in spaces of state care and violence and care are rendered as fundamentally separate categories, Singh calls upon Mitra-Viruna as deities of sunrise and sunset to think about violence and care as companion forces. He applies this new model in the subsequent chapter, “Who Ate Up the Forests?” to analyze forestry management policies in India. Instead of total state control or absence, Singh finds varying degrees of state involvement, confusions, and ambivalences (102).

In chapter four, “The Coarse and the Fine: Contours of a Slow-Moving Crisis,” Singh goes on to analyze food politics of Shahabad in the aftermath of the Green Revolution, a momentous phase of agricultural intensification in the Global South resulting from the widespread adoption of high yielding seed varieties biotechnologically engineered in the so-called West. In a post-Green Revolution Shahabad, a general preference for cultivating and consuming wheat instead of traditional strains of millets took hold. This preference has depleted the water table, as wheat cultivation requires irrigation where millet is rain-fed. A standard frame of analyzing these dynamics already exists, wherein the importation of ecologically inappropriate technologies would be criticized, and the on-the-ground resistance to the importation would be emphasized. Instead of following this program, Singh suggests it holds an “inadequate picture of people’s desires” (112). That is, his interlocutors live with an ever-present sense of threat and crisis, and yet, also prioritize a sense of taste. Wheat is seen as more “fine” and thus valuable. Rather than being either good or bad, Singh argues, wheat should be understood as alternately life-giving and life-denying, to enhance
vitality in one sphere is to deplete in another (115).

Singh develops his thoughts on agriculture in the following chapter, “Contracts, Bonds, and Bonded Labor.” Looking to livelihood creates space for Singh to address the multiform ways Sahariyas create value beyond monetary measures. He looks to potencies – defined as potential and actual life force (134) – in grain economies and the affective intensity of non-alienated work. In this way, he amplifies forms of life that are rich in life force, that are abundant, despite being poor in money and commodities. This, in turn, opens a discussion on ethics and power, which Singh argues are structuring themes for the text. Singh states: “If we call this abundance good, then we can say that it may be possible to live a good life within this milieu. And if we were to inquire further into these possibilities of life, then a new set of conceptual concerns opens up – not only relations of power but also questions of ethics” (135). Ethics, Singh goes on to explain, are ways of being that involve agonistics, defined as forms of contestation that bring us closer to life by increasing vitality; they are contestations that reject life-denying ideals and embrace “nobler” forms of life (162, 281). Quoting Deleuze (1997), Singh affirms, “for me to be true to life means an aversion to ‘high’ morality as ideals of piety and virtues and rules and oughts subtracted from the ‘imperfections’ of life” (138). Drawing upon perspectives from Hindu women’s erotic devotional songs, this definition of ethics, Singh suggests, implies that sacred and profane might be closer than imagined (144). Moreover, Singh examines the adoption of a new deity, Tejaji, by neighboring communities to also look at the way ethical being also involves the simultaneity of intimacy and antagonism so long as this “adds to” lively vitality (185).

This mode of analysis, of finding unity in place of dualism continues across diverse subjects – including human-animal relations, the life of local deities, and ascetics – for the remainder of the book. If this is at times a dizzying reading experience, as each chapter is potentially a book of its own, Singh was deliberate in how he structured the text. On one hand, the book is a nod to classic ethnography in its focus on a single village, Shahabad. On the other, Singh’s focus is far from simple, straightforward or singular. In a forum dedicated to Poverty and the Quest for Life in Somatosphere, Connolly (2015) describes the work as “nomadic,” in the sense of being informed by “a way of inhabiting the planetary condition in which the study is set” (Connolly 2015). As nomad, Singh achieves an attention to locality without resorting to flat-footed localism precisely by an
unblinking and unremitting refusal of binaries. Instead, we are asked by Singh to roam, return, and rethink.

References Cited