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UNDERSTANDING RITUAL AS RITUALISATION AND PRAXIS



M. P. Terence Samuel¹ and Gargi Mukherjee²

“No people could live without first esteeming; but if they want to preserve themselves, then they must not esteem as the neighbor esteems. Much that was good to one people was scorn and infamy to another: thus I found it. Much I found called evil here, and decked out with purple honors there...”

A tablet of the good hangs over every people. Behold, it is the tablet of their overcomings; behold, it is the voice of their will to power.

Praiseworthy is whatever seems difficult to a people; whatever seems indispensable and difficult is called good; and whatever liberates even out of the deepest need, the rarest, the most difficult – that they call holy.

Whatever makes them rule and triumph and shine, to the awe and envy of their neighbors, that is to them the high, the first, the measure,

ABSTRACT

Ritual has been understood variedly by different scholars, according to the context of the ritual. Still a holistic approach towards understanding ritual theoretically is very much lacking, though scholars have studied and elaborated the individual rituals performed in different regions and places. But Catherine Bell, in her works on ritual, attempts to provide a theoretical understanding of ritual of all genres. She takes up different theoretical tools already available in the field of knowledge of different subjects and applies them to understand the nature of ritual theoretically.

Here an attempt has been made by the authors as to how to understand ritual as a process of ritualisation where ritualised social bodies interact, reproduce and recreate social spaces through rituals. Further, Bell understands ritual as praxis where theory and practice are in a dialectical movement, where the one reifies the other perpetually, through the means of tradition and social bodies involving power relations too.

KEYWORDS: Catherine Bell, Ritualisation, Practice, Social Body, Hegemony and Power.

Short Profile

M. P. Terence Samuel is working as an Assistant Professor at Department of Philosophy & Comparative Religion in Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal.

delve deep into the subject in order to understand its relation with the construction of collective consciousness. In recent years, diverse fields, ranging from history to

the meaning of all things...

Verily, men gave themselves all their good and evil. Verily, they did not take it, they did not find it, nor did it come to them as a voice from heaven. Only man placed values in things to preserve himself – he alone created a meaning for things, a human meaning...”

- Nietzsche (Thus Spake Zarathustra)

INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of colonialism, the anthropological studies of ritual came to the fore. Especially, the ritual studies done by Robertson Smith, Mc Lennan, Durkheim and Frazer kindled the interests of the researchers to

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy & Comparative Religion, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal.

²Formerly M.A Student, Department of Philosophy & Comparative Religion, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal.

anthropology and sociology to philosophy, have turned to the study of ritual considering it as a “window” of the cultural dynamics of the people. Many theories on ritual have sprang up in due course. Here, we have made an attempt to understand how ritual, in-itself and for-itself, constructs a community based on Catherine Bell's book *'Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice'*. In this particular book, she gives an overview of the studies done on ritual, tries to reassess what those theories have done with the category of ritual and tries to formulate an analytic view, mostly in the light of the works of neo-Marxists, as to how to grasp the ritual activities in relation to other forms of social action.

First of all, let us try to understand what ritual is. The definitions of ritual are mostly based upon the consideration that it is constituted as an autonomous phenomenon. But when we try to understand ritual as an autonomous phenomenon, its interrelation with other domains of existence gets blurred. By blurring the definitions in order to make way for mapping the strategies of ritual, Bell suggests that “Definitions of ritual must go on to suggest explicitly or implicitly, the nature and relation of nonritual activity and various degrees of nearly-but-not-quite-ritual behaviour.” She continues to say that “what counts as ritual can rarely be pinned down in general since ritualized practices constantly play off the field of action in which they emerge.” However, by pointing out the consistency among the scholars in the description of ritual, she opines that “ritual is a type of critical juncture wherein some pair of opposing social or cultural forces comes together... Whether it is defined in term of features of ‘enthusiasm’ (fostering groupism) or ‘formalism’ (fostering the repetition of the traditional), ritual is consistently depicted as a mechanistically discrete and paradigmatic means of sociocultural integration, appropriation, or transformation.”

On the other hand, theoretical descriptions of ritual mostly consider it as action, differentiating it from belief, symbols and myths.

Ritual, in these descriptions, is understood as routinized, habituated and mimetic actions whereby the conceptual categories and beliefs are understood as aspects of the religious sphere. Further, there emerges another set of problems with these approaches that the believer's approach to ritual and the observer/theorist's understanding of ritual never coexist. That is, the ritual participant remains an actor and the cultural theorist/observer plays the role of the thinker. This leads us to the similar situation when Frederic Jameson raised the question in the context of the linguistic analysis of Saussure's theory, as to ‘what extent is the object of study the thought pattern of the thinker rather than that of the ritual itself.’ These dichotomies clearly show the failure of the theoretical descriptions as to how the ritual activities are produced and experienced by the native actors. So a middle ground is needed wherein the participant/performer and the theorist-observer could meet. In order to avoid the dichotomic theoretical descriptions of the ritual, Catherine Bell chooses ‘ritualization’ itself as the tool to study ritual.

Now, in the following passages, we shall attempt to understand what she means by ‘ritualization’ and whether she succeeds in her attempt in the description of the ritual activity, overcoming the pitfalls of earlier theories.

Ritualization

As noted earlier while discussing the definitions of the ritual, distinctions are routinely drawn between ritual studies and liturgics, religious ritual and secular ritual, ritual and ceremonial, secular ritual and secular ceremony, political ritual and civic ceremonial, private ritual and collective ritual, rites of rebellion and rites of solidarity, dramatic performance and ritual performance, the formality of games and the formality of ritual, ritual and festival, festival and holiday, and so on. As these distinctions are increasing,

scholars tend to think all the human activities as ritual or on the other hand to think of ritual as an autonomous phenomenon. Some stress the distinctiveness of ritual, how it is clearly different from all other kinds of activity while others stress the congruity of ritual with other forms of human action, usually by seeing ritual as “the expressive, symbolical or communicative aspect” of action in general. In this context, in order to differentiate ritual activities from other human activities, the term ‘ritualization’ serves better.

Sir Julian Huxley first configured the term ‘ritualization’ to indicate “the adaptive formalization or canalization of emotionally motivated behaviour”; in his ethological framework, the term served to “secure more effective communication (signalling) function, reduction of intra-group damage, or better intra-group bonding.” However, the problem with this approach is that it emphasizes the communicative nature of ritual in terms of the human behavioural patterns. If so, how the ritual activities can be distinguished from other activities without bracketing it out from the social activities in general? In such case, Bell proposes ritualization as a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other quotidian activities; as a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’. For her, ritualization attempts to answer the questions such as ‘Under what circumstances are such activities distinguished from other activities? How and why are they distinguished? What do these activities do that other activities can not and will not do?’ By incorporating ritual activities into cultural-specificity, her terminology seems to be avoiding the pitfalls of the behavioural approach to ritual.

In order to explicate her view, she draws the example of Christian Eucharist meal. The Eucharistic meal is distinguished from ordinary meal in every respect as a ritual. It invokes

differentiation from other meals like the large gathering in front of an altar, distinctive periodicity, insufficiency of the meal for physical nourishment, no kitchen utensils to serve the meal and the liturgical words pronounced before its practice. In the “Eucharistic meal, whole set of oppositions emerge to dominate other sets. The scheme of a central or ‘centred’ community versus a dispersed population is generated as people congregate together, coming from different directions and situations to assemble at a specific place and time. When they are gathered, this scheme is overlaid with a higher versus lower opposition in which a raised altar and elevated host, the lifting and lowering voices and eyes, as well as sequences of standing and kneeling, and so on, all generate a contrast between a higher reality (spiritual) and a lower one (mundane). However, this scheme is overlaid in turn by an inner versus outer one when a higher reality is internalized through the food shared by participants (and different bodies are merged into a hegemonic unity in Christ). Ultimately, the inner-outer scheme comes to dominate the oppositions of higher-lower and centred-dispersed, generating an experience of a higher spiritual authority as an internalized reality.” Ritualization of meal could have employed other means in order to differentiate itself from other meals such as having it once in one’s lifetime, or providing bread and wine in larger quantity than needed by a person, or having the meal in a forest, or with those outsiders or beggars who criss-cross or remain outside the premises of the church (in Indian conditions). What we understand from the above discussion is that formality, fixity and repetition are not intrinsic qualities of ritualization rather they are the strategies of ritualization, though they are not universal strategy for producing ritualised acts. Through these strategies, privileged differentiations are generated in ritualization and in turn they are hierarchized only to be integrated within the whole, though not reconciling those differences

in the Durkheimian sense.

As seen in the above example of Eucharist meal, the strategy of ritualization is embodiment of the privileged differences. To say it in the words of Bell, "the strategies of ritualization are particularly rooted in the body, specifically, the interaction of the social body within a symbolically constituted spatial and temporal environment. Essential to ritualization is the circular production of a ritualized body which in turn produces ritualized practices." This aspect of ritualization needs to be differentiated from Durkheim's notion of "man is double". According to Durkheim, humans are both social and individual at the same time. For him, the differentiation between the social and the individual exists as something similar to the mental construct which is always in dialectical relation with the objectified environment. However, with the recent studies on the importance of body in the appropriation of social values, it is understood now that the differentiation is constructed or produced on the social body itself in its dialectical relation with the structured or structuring environment. According to Bell, "the focus on the (ritualized) acts themselves illuminates the circularity to the body's interaction with this environment: generating it, it is molded by it in turn. By virtue of this circularity, space and time are redefined through the physical movements of bodies projecting organizing schemes on the space-time environment on the one hand while reabsorbing these schemes as the nature of reality on the other. In this process such schemes become socially instinctive automatism of the body and implicit strategies for shifting the power relationships among symbols." The embodiment of the privileged differentiations generated through ritualization is also related to the organization of power relations in the society. This embodiment works within and is generative of hierarchical and/or closed societies. The implicit dynamic and 'end' of ritualization – that which it does not see itself doing – can be said to

be the production of a 'ritualized body'. A ritualized body is a body invested with a 'sense' of ritual.

Ritualization as Practice

After the foregoing analysis, it is now evident to ask the question as to whether ritualization is in itself a practice/activity alone or is it something more than an activity in the sense that it has a culture-specific strategy with it. The dichotomy between theory and practice has been a long standing issue in the academic debates. In the works of Marx, practice is understood as the proper way of being theoretical and using it. And here, Bell uses the Marxist notion of practice to understand the process of ritualization.

Invoking Jameson's argument in his work, *The Political Unconscious*, Bell states that "it is the theorist's practice of Marxist theory that is seen to resolve the bifurcations of theory and practice on models of history". Further, she invokes Pierre Bourdieu's arguments, in the opening pages of his work, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, about the need to transcend the subjective categories of the native experience as well as the objective categories of the outside observer, wherein he "defines practice itself in terms of a dialectical relationship between a structured environment (by which he invokes "objectivist structures," which are not necessarily the real world but an agent's practical interpretation of the world) and the structured dispositions engendered in people which lead them to reproduce the environment even in a transformed form. She uses this argument to claim that ritualization is also a practice in the sense that it is theoretical practice/purposive activity wherein the structured environment and the embodied disposition operate in circularity.

According to Bell, practice is 1) situational; 2) strategic; 3) embedded in misrecognition of what it is doing; and 4) able to reproduce and reconfigure a vision of the order

of power in the world or what she terms it as 'redemptive hegemony'. She thus uses each of the categories to explain ritualization itself since, she opines that "When put in the context of purposive activity with all the characteristics of human practice, a focus on ritual yields to a focus on ritualization."

1) Practice is Situational: "Much of what is important to practice cannot be grasped outside of the specific context in which it occurs; when abstracted from its immediate context, an activity is not quite the same activity. Practice may embody determinate influences deriving from other situations, but it is not mere expression or effect of these influences... A focus on the act itself renders these influences (structures or sources) nonexistent except insofar as they exist within the act itself." Further, she invokes Edward Said's notion of 'worldliness' of texts by which he means that texts are cultural entities that act in the world... (and that) "how a text, by being a text, by insisting upon and employing all the devices of textuality" functions in the world to "dislodge other texts".

So we can say that ritualization is "an effective way of acting only under certain cultural circumstances." It is situated in its culture-historical context; it is embedded in its immediate culture-historical reality, along with its structured environment and structuring dispositions; ritualization always happens within its immediate sociocultural and socio-historical situations. It is situational in the sense that it indulges in purposive activity to dislodge other activities by way making privileged differentiations strategically.

2) Practice as Strategic: Bourdieu explicates practice as "intentionless invention of regulated improvisation". What he means by this is that the logic of practice is not that of an intellectual logic, though it has a logic of sorts. "Practice, as real activity in time, by its very nature dodges the relations of intellectualist logic... Its practical or

instrumental logic is strategic and economic in that it remains as implicit and rudimentary as possible." Though these strategies are also culture-historical specific, ritualization can be said to be the strategic manipulation of its situations, in its own situatedness. It is strategic manipulation of situations in the sense that it differentiates ritualized activities from other activities. The strategic production of schemes of differences helps for the objectification /reification of the environment in such a way that 'the environment appears to be the source of the schemes and their values'. In this way, it looks circular or dialectical.

Even when the ritual is understood as the repetition of this strategic act of differentiation, it can be said to be its negotiation of the present in terms of the past, though this past is far removed from the immediate situations of the present. This act of repetition need not be understood as the 'standardized process of traditionalization'. As Bell argues, "Ritual can be a strategic way to 'traditionalize', that is, to construct a type of tradition, but in doing so it can also challenge and renegotiate the very basis of tradition to the point of upending much of what had been seen as fixed previously or by other groups." Thus ritual is not merely an act of differentiation of activities, it is also a strategy of negotiation or renegotiation of the past in terms of the present through its strategic act of repetition. Bell continues to say, "The continuity, innovation, and oppositional contrasts established in each case are strategies that arise from the 'sense of ritual' played out under particular conditions – not in a fixed ritual structure, a closed grammar, or an embalmed historical model." As discussed earlier, formality, fixity and repetition are the specific strategies of ritualization and they are not the intrinsic values of ritual. When these categories are abrogated from the strategic aspects of ritualization, ritual appears to be the 'dead-weight of tradition'.

"Ritualization, as a strategic mode of

action effective within certain social orders, does not, in any useful understanding of the words, 'control' individuals or society. Yet ritualization is very much concerned with power", says Bell. Durkheim's model of ritual analysis proposes the following four theses, namely, 1) social solidarity thesis, 2) the channelling of conflict thesis, 3) the repression thesis and 4) the definition of reality thesis, as the means of social control. The social solidarity thesis proposes that ritual exercises social control through the generation of collective consciousness; the channelling of conflict thesis suggests that the ritual works as a safety valve and that ritual affords a place for both structure and anti-structure; the repression thesis suggests as to how ritual operates to control the violence within humans by invoking the binary aspects of culture/nature; the reality thesis tries to find a central mechanism within the structure of ritual that addresses the issues of behaviour, communication, values and the philosophical categories of reality. Delineating from those views of understanding of ritual, and yet capturing and hinging on the very 'essential' basis of those understandings, Bell provides an analytic view of ritualization on the basis of power relations.

As discussed earlier, ritualization is about the embodiment of power relations. By addressing the issues, 1) how ritual effects embodiment of principles for an ordering of reality and 2) how this embodiment works within and is generative of hierarchical and/or closed societies, Bell tries to demonstrate that "ritual does not control; rather it constitutes a particular dynamic of social empowerment." By handling Foucault's 'analytics of power', Bell argues that power does not exist as a substantive entity nor is it some 'thing' that can be possessed and wielded on the 'object'. If one tries to interpret the above argument in terms of Geertz, power needs to be understood as 'poetics' and not as mere 'mechanics'. According to Foucault, power is a "mode of action that does not intend to act directly on persons or things, which is what

violence does, but indirectly on actions. The exercise of power is always a way of acting upon an acting subject(s) by virtue of their acting or being capable of action." Here power is redefined in terms of dialectics of practice in the sense that the power works from below as well as from above; neither the dominant nor the dominated are mute.

Freedom is the condition or pre-condition for the exercise of power on the free subjects; here, freedom means the option to act differently or the accessible options. Central to the issue of power is insubordination or resistance; to explore power means to explore the insubordination or resistance to power that provokes and legitimizes its actions. In the struggle for power, the two forces construct a kind of limit for the other with the possibility for reversal; there is a misrecognition among the participants if the struggle that they win and remain a winner though the struggle aims for the stabilization of power. But when a power relation eliminates the insubordination itself, the other gets reduced to the total subservience and or an overt adversary.

By quoting Foucault's use of the term 'ritual' to articulate the 'analytics of power', wherein he makes use of the term to mean the 'formalized, routinized and often supervised practices that mould the body', Bell explains ritualization as embodied power relations. For Foucault, body is "the place where the most minute and local social practices are linked up with large scale organization of power." The body is the political field where "power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs." Thus Bell explains the embodiment of social power relations as the strategy of ritualization; as a political technology of the body, ritualization differentiates ritual activities and makes them embodied in the social body. Further invoking Foucault's notion of 'strategy' that it "implies improvisational, expedient or

the minimum form of rationality needed”, she maintains that the strategic nature of ritualization is also improvisational and culture-historical.

3) Practice as Embedded in Misrecognition of What it is Doing: Bourdieu provides a clear understanding of this aspect of ritualization through his elaboration of the ‘exchange of gift’. In order for its effective working, the ritual of gift exchange misrecognizes ‘a deliberate oversight’ of the ‘fake circulation of the fake coin’ and ‘a reciprocal swapping of items with no intrinsic value’; misrecognition is that which enables this ritual of gift exchange to be ‘seen and experienced as an inaugural act of generosity’. Though generosity is experienced in this particular act of ritual, the action is itself shrouded in ‘indeterminacy, ambiguities and equivocations’.

Althusser’s analysis of practice gives further understanding of this aspect of ritualization. His notion of ‘sighting in an oversight’ particularly speaks about the strategic blindness of practice. “A practice does not see itself do what it intends to do... In simpler terms, practice sees what it intends to accomplish in a new situation, but it does not see the strategies it uses to produce what it actually does accomplish... the effectiveness of practice is not the resolution of the problematic to which it addresses itself but a complete change in the terms of the problematic, a change it does not see itself make.” Practice “does not see what it does: its production of a new answer without a question, and simultaneously the production of a new latent question contained by default in this new answer.”

Turning back to the issue of embodiment, we analysed as to how ritualization produces the ritualized body through its series of dialectical movements with the structured and structuring environment. “This is a circular process that tends to be misrecognized, if it is perceived at all, as values and experiences impressed upon the

person and community from sources of power and order beyond it... The social body internalizes the principles of the environment being delineated. Inscribed within the social body, these principles enable the ritualized person to generate in turn strategic schemes that can appropriate or dominate other sociocultural situations.” That is, the appropriation of values from the environment by the ritualized body is decontextualized and understood as absolute, eternal or as sourced beyond its own situatedness. Also, the decontextualization also yields to another latent problematic that it leads the ritualized body to generate and appropriate other contexts with the same decontextualized values and experiences which were derived by it in its prior/‘primal’ environment. Thus it leads to the practice of redemptive hegemony.

The aspect of misrecognition built within the process of ritualization need not be confused with “mystifying the phenomenon of ritual or seeing mystification as essential to what ritual does.” It is about the question of what ritualization sees and does not see in its circular relation consisted of environment and social body. This is the ambiguity of ritual activities which has been recognized by scholars as an important aspect of ritualization and for the distinctive efficacy of ritual, as noted in the ritual of gift exchange.

“Ritualization sees itself as *responding* to a place, event, force, problem or tradition... (It) does not see how... it redefines the circumstances to which it is responding. It does not see how its own actions reorder and reinterpret the circumstances so as to afford the sense of a fit among the main spheres of experience – body, community, cosmos... The complex and multifarious details of ritual, most of which must be done just so, are seen as appropriate demands or legitimate tradition. They are seen as arbitrary producers of distinctions... Ritualization sees the evocation of a consensus on values, symbols and behaviour...”

It does not see the way in which hegemonic social order is appropriated as a redemptive process..."

4) Practice as Redemptive Hegemony: Gramsci's use of the term 'hegemony' identifies the elitist's domination and subordination of people's unself-conscious awareness of the world. As a 'lived ordering of power', it is reproduced, renewed and resisted in enormous variety of practices. Further, Bell makes use of Kenelm Burridge's notion of redemptive process as the cultural life in order to focus on the actual workings of hegemonic power. The basic to Burridge's notion of redemptive process suggests that 1) these power relations are produced in various ways, 2) people have a sense of their place in some ordering of power relations and 3) they can envision the efficacy of acting within that ordering of power relations.

In the generation of a series of privileged oppositions within ritualization, some oppositions quietly come to dominate others. Within this scheme, all the categories defer to others in a redundantly circular way, in order to create a sense of unity. This may be further understood by way of Derridian notion of *differance* and Laclau's notion of 'Equivalential chain'. Here within the system of schemes, every category feels united with the dominant within the whole, having a sense of fit within the whole. This mastery of internalization of schemes, which Bell call it as 'ritual mastery', is capable of interpreting reality in such a way as to afford perceptions and experiences of a redemptive hegemonic order.

In order to understand the redemptive hegemonic aspect of ritualization, one must understand as to how the process of ritualization differentiates by opposing and unites by dominating. It creates a sense of fit in the ritualized body, however minimal, within the overall scheme of differentiation and domination; thus it creates a unity among its differentiated and hierarchized elements. Herein, 'ideology' functions does not require complete

faith in each tenet or idea; all that is required is consent - what Bell calls as 'sense of fit' or 'sense of ritual'. Bell argues, "For Gramsci, hegemonic discourse is dialogic not monolithic, defined by opposition even when the antagonistic voices are suppressed into silence. Subordinated classes consent to a "negotiated" version of the dominant values when there are no articulated alternatives. Thus, outside of the dominant class, an ideology tends to consist of unexamined assumptions which amount to a "manipulation of bias" in favour of the dominant group. Quoting Merquior, Bell says "it is necessary to stop seeing ideology 'as a vehicle of unanimous legitimacy beliefs' and begin to 'see it as the instrument of an appropriation of a rhetoric of legitimacy by power-holding and power-seeking groups'."

Drawing attention to Bourdieu's notion of complicity of the subordinated classes, Bell says "This complicity with dominant class values is neither passive submission on the one hand nor free adoption on the other. It is an act of misrecognition by which the dominated class accepts the legitimacy of the values of the dominant class and applies the criteria of these values to its own practices, even when doing so is not favourable to it...this act of misrecognition is essentially a strategic engagement in a struggle over symbols, a struggle in which contending factions seek 'to impose the definition of the social world most in conformity with their interests. Misrecognition is, therefore, not a matter of being duped, but a strategy for appropriating symbols... it is only in this process of struggling to appropriate symbols that symbols become the prime instrument of social integration and consensus. There may be no agreement on the symbol and a dramatic degree of variation when interpretation is attempted, but still the same symbols are a common focus of engagement, a negotiated conflict." Thus, the unity created through the process of ritualization, by way of 'complicity', struggle and negotiation, is

hegemonic; it is social integration and not social solidarity and not even social control, as proposed by Durkheimians.

NOTES

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29. Catherine Bell, *Op. Cit.*, p. 82.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

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33. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 13 – 29, 171 – 7.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 199 – 201.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

41. Michel Foucault, Alan Sheridan (Tr.), *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage Books, New York, 1979, p. 25, as quoted in Catherine Bell, *Op. Cit.*, p. 202.

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43. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

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48. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 109 – 10.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 83 – 4.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 140 – 1.

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56. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 190 – 1.



M. P. Terence Samuel

Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy & Comparative Religion, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Benga.



Gargi Mukherjee

Formerly M.A Student, Department of Philosophy & Comparative Religion, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal.

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