

Review:

South Asian in the Mid-South: Migrations of Literacies by Iswari P. Pandey

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South Asian in the Mid-South regards literacies to be constantly shifting and jostling, like the persons and cultures of the world. As the title indicates, Iswari P. Pandey looks at a specific group of people who live in the pseudonym-dubbed city of “Kingsville, USA.” The work “responds to calls... for a culturally situated study of literacy practices in actual use” (19). Through interviews with the citizens of Kingsville, Pandey considers how literacies are shaped by the forces of language, tradition, and identity. This seems to be a nod to Deborah Brandt, whose *Literacy in American Lives* focused on the literacy practices and educations of a particular Midwestern region. Pandey doesn’t profile individuals in quite so much detail as Brandt, instead choosing to move among multiple perspectives. For example, when observing the “Hindu School,” Pandey interweaves perspectives from multiple teachers and students at different stages of education. This is meant to emphasize to the concept of movement, which Pandey calls “a fundamental

fact of human life” (48). The migration of cultures and literacies leads people to “(re-)create institutions and (re)invent myriad literacy practices to keep close to their homelands and to be at home in their new home” (63). Through all this movement and gathering of perspectives, Pandey hopes to understand how literacy can help stabilize a people by forming a sense of community.

The theoretical foundation of the work is strong, leaning on the tradition of New Literacy Studies. Pandey adds to that tradition with an appreciation of cultural studies, especially of scholars like Homi Bhaba and Gloria Anzaldúa, who explore transnational and transcultural issues (30). The weaving of New Literacy and Cultural Studies traditions allows Pandey to make some key assertions. Notably, Pandey dispels the notion of a stable community. Traditional research tends to see communities as stable entities; in reality, communities are adaptable and constantly changing. This is revealed quite easily in Pandey’s exploration of immigrant communities. Pandey also reasserts the importance of the “in-between space” of multiculturalism (30). The “in-between space” is an area of great tension between the dominant host culture and the ethno/linguistic root culture. Pandey believes that literacy practices help immigrants negotiate that tension, as it “facilitates these immigrants’ sense of identity, community, intragroup solidarity, and cross-cultural exchanges” (31). These claims are justified by the ethnographic work of the remaining chapters.

In the chapter “Genes and Jeans,” Pandey observes the teaching of the Sanskrit language at a Kingsville Hindu School. In the Hindu tradition, Sanskrit is the language of prayer and sacred texts, somewhat comparable to Latin for Catholicism. Through a series of interviews, Pandey shows how different students and teachers interpret their learning of Sanskrit. Many see some benefit in it yet understand that it has little practical value. As Pandey relates, most of the business and teaching of the school is conducted in English; nonetheless, there is a cultural relevance attached to Sanskrit that developed in the unique circumstances of Kingsville. Pandey concludes that “Sanskrit functioned less as a target language and more as the subject and object of cultural identity” (90). Because of its ancient and transcendent roots, the language could unify many

different people in a grand appreciation of shared culture. Pandey thus reveals a key aspect of a particular community and also shows the potential of literacy to unite people of different backgrounds. At the same time, the reader can see the shifting and sometimes dubious nature of literacy, as people simultaneously reach forward with practical English and reach backward with ancient Sanskrit. These diverse practices suggest dynamic literacy development and make visible the tensions of literacy within a migrant community.

Though culture is certainly center stage, Pandey's explorations of gender are just as revealing. The chapter "Details and Diversions: (Re)Writing Gender Roles" adds a new and powerful dimension to Pandey's ethnographic exploration, combining South Asian tradition and American egalitarianism. The women described in the book often portray themselves as defenders of their culture – a trend that Pandey attributes to the long tradition of divine motherhood in most South Asian traditions. This combines with the newfound professions and interests of South Asian women, generally. For instance, in traditional Muslim culture (and, to a lesser extent, non-Muslim South Asia), teachers are always men; yet in Kingsville, even in the Muslim school, the teachers are almost all women. The combination of American liberalism with the desire for cultural preservation allows women to interpret religious stories, scriptures, and traditions in a progressive way. Indeed, Pandey believes that the newfound roles of women allow them to formally challenge the status-quo of gender relations (114). While this not a groundbreaking conclusion in itself, the strategy of movement and the consideration of multiple cultures opens new spaces and provides plenty of opportunities for synergy.

One shortcoming stands out in this otherwise admirable work: Pandey rarely considers economic factors, even as those factors beg recognition. Each of the primary interviewees seemed to enjoy at least a middle-class income, with some of them having great financial resources. While that's no reason for indictment in itself, there is a lack of perspective from those South Asians who cannot afford a private Hindu or private Muslim school. In Pandey's work, there is one tragically short passage about a Bangladeshi family who "had only a limited English proficiency" (136). Azi, mother and matriarch, stays at home to care for her four children while her husband works

two jobs. Because of their financial and literacy situation, Azi's family is not able to protect their culture in the same way as the women of the Hindu School. Azi and her family have little or no formal education, presumably because they could not afford it. Though the family spoke Bengali, none of the children could read or write in Bengali. Noting all this, Pandey merely concludes that "Class wields enormous influence on how individuals and groups use literacy gateways and sponsorships to (re)produce their culture and identity" (136). The amount of space dedicated to this issue – less than one paragraph – betrays the importance of economics in both literacy and the preservation of culture. While Pandey cannot do everything, the reader should temper any conclusions with an awareness of economic factors since nearly all of the book's interviewees are well-educated, come from relatively wealthy families, and enjoy many advantages in life and literacy.

South Asian in the Mid-South deserves the praise and awards that it has received. The work continues many of the traditions of literacy studies but does so in a new and often quite productive way. Pandey's engagement with a new and burgeoning type of community should be recognized by modern literacy scholars. Pandey's strategy of movement should be taken seriously in future literacy projects, and his warnings about stable communities should be heeded. Indeed, the redefining of community and its intimate connections with literacy may be Pandey's greatest achievement.

WORKS CITED

Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

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