

Chapter 1



Providing the Context

Field Research and the Field

As with the ethnographic portion of most research on India, the present study is heavily dependent upon fieldwork. Whenever I read a study or watch a documentary about people, especially in a culture foreign to the researchers, I cannot help but speculate as to the kind of personal relationships that exist or existed between researcher and subject. As a student of fieldwork who has been involved in observing India and its people for over thirty years, it has become quite apparent that the type of association and familiarity field-workers have with their subjects and the biases and preferences of both researcher and subject combine to have a powerful influence on the results of the studies done. Yet, such biases are not supposed to affect academic research and are rarely discussed or disclosed. In performing and presenting their field studies, researchers are assumed to use scholarly objectivity and detached subjectivity. Those of us who do anthropological field research are generally expected to communicate effectively the feeling of having, in Clifford Geertz's words, truly "been there," but without actually allowing the experiences to compromise our ability to maintain distanced objectivity. Such an approach places a great deal of expectation on the researcher, and is not necessarily realistic or beneficial. As humans studying and seeking to understand other humans, it is natural to be influenced, and to influence others, by our interactions and experiences. Rather than deny this, it seems more realistic and appropriate to recognize and acknowledge the influences and take them into consideration as we attempt an objective orientation to the endeavor. In this way, we allow for individuality, personal experience, and scholarship all to be used as tools in crafting our work. It is with this approach in mind that I include in this chapter not only a background survey of the area of this study, but also my own relationship to India, to the Ram *bhakti* tradition, and to the Ramnami Samaj.

The primary geographic focus of the field research portion of this study is Chhattisgarh, an ethnographically designated region in Central India. Formerly comprising the eastern portion of Madhya Pradesh, it became its own state on

November 1, 2000.¹ Chhattisgarh consists of approximately twenty thousand villages and has a variety of cultural traditions unique to the area. Although there has been a great deal of road work over the last few decades, a large portion of the rural population still lives in small hamlets accessible only by foot, oxcart, or two-wheeled vehicles. There are large forested areas in the state, yet much of the land used in farming is arid and relatively infertile, depleted by centuries of farming practices that have increasingly deprived the land of nutrients with little reintroduction of organic matter in the process. In some sections of the state, even though the soil remains fertile, a lack of irrigation water prevents large-scale production. The result is low crop output and a relatively impoverished rural population.

Chhattisgarh is home to nearly two-thirds of the “Scheduled Castes”² and a large majority of the tribals of the former Madhya Pradesh. In addition, *shudras* dominate the ranks of caste Hindus in the state, and in many villages *harijans* are actually the dominant caste. Therefore, relative to India as a whole, the region has a high percentage of non-upper-caste Hindus, especially in the rural areas. The state then provides a unique setting in which to study those in the social and religious periphery. An observer or researcher is afforded ample opportunity to see low caste and Untouchable life more or less in its own context, separated from the direct daily subjugating influence of high castes upon them. In the introduction to his valuable and insightful study of the *chamars* of Lucknow, Ravindra Khare writes of the Untouchable:

Whatever he is reflects on the larger society and its values. Although he is now more studied and talked about, he himself remains a social enigma. This is so because he is too readily stereotyped by others while he himself often remains remote and silent. . . . Once we prepare ourselves to consider the Untouchable on his own terms, after penetrating certain stereotypes, his arguments for alternative self-evaluation begin to surface.³

In rural Chhattisgarh, the voice of the Untouchable is much louder than what can be heard in much of India, because it is not muted by the caste Hindu society that dominates urban areas. In the villages of the region, *harijans* have more opportunity for self-expression, and this gives us an excellent opportunity to see them more “on their own terms.” Writing on Chhattisgarh in his early-twentieth-century study of the Central Provinces, R.V. Russell observes,

Here the Chamārs have to some extent emancipated themselves from their servile status and have become cultivators, and occasionally even *mālguzārs* or landed proprietors.⁴

Prior to the 1930s, the name of the dominant *harijan* subcaste in the region was “*chamar*,” which is also the largest of the Untouchable subcastes in India. The large number of poor and illiterate Chhattisgarhi *harijans* has long reinforced the common preconception and stereotypes of the area held by many Indians, that it is a place bereft of culture and religion. A closer look at the place and its people, however, proves this to be far from the case.

The early history of Chhattisgarh is obscure, although mention of it can be found as early as the fourth century C.E., when it was considered a part of the southern portion of the kingdom of Kosala. Since that time it has been subsumed in various kingdoms, sometimes divided among several. The boundaries, as they exist today, are roughly the same as they were under the Haihaya dynasty, which ruled the region from the tenth century until the 1740s.⁵ The Maratha conquest of Chhattisgarh was complete in 1758, and some historians have suggested that during the next hundred years the Marathas stripped the region of anything and everything of value, leaving it in the condition of extreme economic poverty that persists even in the present.⁶

During their respective reigns, both the Haihayas and the Maratha conquerors brought in their own *brahman* priests, whose languages and cultures differed from the local population. These immigrants from the north and the west remained primarily in the urban areas, as did most of the upper-caste immigrants to the region, especially during the last few centuries. Consequently, a greater variety of languages and more members of upper castes are found in the cities of Chhattisgarh than in the rural areas, where local dialects and the low caste tend to dominate. Chhattisgarh has also been a refuge for, and seat of, non-establishment movements and activities in the social, religious, and political arenas. Expatriots from many other regions of India have settled there, adding to the diversity of its cultural and religious dimensions. From the latter part of the nineteenth century and until Indian independence, the Central Provinces served as an important center of anti-British activity and agitation, much of which took place in Chhattisgarh. Thus, on religious, social, and political levels, the region has long been the home for nonorthodox Indian life.

The multifaceted culture of the area is still alive with various forms of traditional music, singing, and dancing. When asked to identify themselves, most of the residents, young and old, refer to themselves first as “Chhattisgarhi” rather than Indian or Hindu. Until recently, modernization, Westernization, and secularization have not had the same degree of influence in the region that they have exerted in many other parts of North India. More dominant influences have included sanskritization, urbanization, and nonorthodox religions.⁷ However, during the last decade, a sharp rise in modernization and Westernization can be seen in all the urban areas, with inroads into the rural areas as well.

Rather than concentrating on a particular Chhattisgarhi village, my research examines the religion of the region, focusing primarily on the Ramnami

Samaj, who reside, for the most part, in the central and northern portions of Chhattisgarh. Over the centuries, the region has given birth to a variety of low-caste religious movements, and the Ramnami sect is fairly new by Indian standards, having existed for barely a hundred years. In that short time, however, the *samaj* has had a significant influence on the religious and social life of the region. Since over 95 percent of the sect members live in rural areas and over 99 percent are *harijan*, a study of the sect requires focus on *harijan* religion and life in Chhattisgarh. This study does not dwell on contemporary caste Hindu religious beliefs and practices of the region, except as points of reference, for they have relatively little direct impact on the religious life of contemporary Ramnamis.

In India, it is difficult to understand a single village without looking at its connections with surrounding villages and cultures. Nevertheless, it must be realized that, depending upon the area of focus, the sphere of influence can be large or small. A village in one of the more populous states like Uttar Pradesh, for example, is more strongly influenced not only by its surrounding villages but also by the state and the nation. This is due to the central role such states tend to play in national politics, the infrastructure of the state (i.e., roads, railway, bus system, electricity, etc.), the prevalence of government schools (from elementary to college level), and so forth. Such is not the case in much of rural Chhattisgarh. Lacking roads, transportation, and electricity, Chhattisgarhi villages are not nearly as connected to the outside world, physically, economically, or culturally. They have close relations with the other nearby villages but often have little direct contact with the country beyond that. In addition, the lower caste status of so many of the area's residents has traditionally restricted their involvement in the brahmanical religious culture and society that tended to connect the urban centers of Madhya Pradesh with urban centers to the north and west.

Personal Background and Research Experience

In formal settings anthropologists are supposed to be dispassionate analysts; because our confrontations with the extraordinary are unscientific, we are not supposed to include them in our discourse. It is simply not appropriate to expose to our colleagues the texture of our heart or the uncertainties of our "gaze."⁸

I first visited India in early 1968. It was only a three-week excursion, but it instilled in me a strong desire to return. That opportunity came during the spring of the following year. A few months after returning to India on my second trip, I became acquainted with a Ramanandi Vaishnav *sadhu*,⁹ or monk, and this connection led to my initiation in the Ramanandi order in January of 1970. Having been raised in a devotional Italian Catholic family, I found it both familiar and

comfortable to be surrounded by, and immersed in, the sensuous ritualism and emotional personalism of contemporary Hindu India. During my years as a *sadhu*, my time was divided between living essentially alone in a lower Himalayan valley, spending time and studying with my ascetic teachers and other *sadhhus*, and wandering through villages, generally but not exclusively in the northern plains and in the Himalayas. At first, the fact that I was a foreigner was a strong influence in what and how I experienced India. Later, as I became more familiar with the religious culture and with various dialects of Hindi (the dominant language in the North), my not being Indian seemed to have less and less direct influence on my daily life. Since more than four hundred million Indians speak at least some dialect of Hindi, either as their first or second language, it is the indigenous language of greatest access. As my knowledge of various dialects increased, so did the opportunities for direct personal relationships with Indians in the areas I frequented.¹⁰

Generally speaking, rural Indians tend to have quite a provincial geographic view of their world, and thus tend to see all those from a different cultural and linguistic region as outsiders, be they Kashmiri, Keralan, or Kenyan. Obviously, those who share aspects of the broader pan-Indian cultural traditions are seen as less distant than those who do not. Most villagers are quite friendly and tend to be curious when meeting any outsiders. Often, when a villager discovered that I understood or could converse in his or her dialect, I would immediately be asked questions about my village, such as what people do there, what the cows are like, how much milk do they give, or why I became a *sadhu*. Being a Vaishnav monk actually opened many doors for me, since most rural Hindus, regardless of their caste background, like to talk with wandering *sadhhus* who have knowledge from and experiences in the outside world. Additionally, the scriptural frame of reference most common to North Indian villagers is Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas*, the primary text of my monastic order. Many villagers look to *sadhhus* for advice concerning family, emotional, or financial problems. Others seek talismans or *mantras* to help them fulfill any of a number of wishes, both material and nonmaterial. Still others solicit charity or like to associate with monks out of a desire to vicariously experience the freedom they perceive wandering mendicants to have. Finally, some simply hope to partake in the various smokable intoxicants *sadhhus* are often believed to possess.¹¹

As a whole, the Ramanandi order has become extremely sanskritized, although on the individual level a great many nonorthodox beliefs and practices are prevalent in its ranks. The more I lived and traveled with Ramanandis, the more I was made aware of various value systems that exist in India, independent of the central value system of the orthodox *brahman*. For the most part, Ramanandi *sadhhus* have learned to adapt to the idiosyncrasies and values of each ethno-cultural group with which they come in contact, and many become

quite proficient at doing so. The older monks with whom I spent time impressed upon me the importance of doing the same, making it quite clear to me that they did not see the movement back and forth between various value systems as necessarily negative. To them, it is simply a means to adopt and to encompass various cultural forms, thereby enhancing a *sadhu's* ability to communicate with a broader section of the populace.

During the mid-1970s, I spent several years traveling in and out of India with a Vaishnav teacher. Frequently acting as translator and interpreter for English-speaking foreigners, Bengalis, or South Indians who visited him, I began to see an even greater diversity of religious and cultural value systems and expressions. It became apparent that many Hindus have adopted and adapted orthodox religious lexicon to identify vastly divergent concepts and practices. It seems that the sanskritization of religious language, more than actions, has helped to foster the misconception that there exists an overarching adherence by Hindus to orthodox beliefs and values.

The Indians with whom I had the most frequent interaction as a *sadhu* were high caste.¹² These included religious teachers and philosophers, temple priests and patrons, astrologers and politicians, landlords and businessmen. Also, since there were so few Westerners living as Hindu monks in those days, many Indians regarded a *videshi* (foreigner) *sadhu* as an object of interest. This somewhat unique status helped provide me with an introduction and access to a relatively diverse cross section of the population. I mention this because my relationships with many of the people who have subsequently become important sources for the data and information used in this book started as personal friendships, some more than thirty years ago. Moreover, even though my academic research has focused on the beliefs and practices of some of them, my relationship with most of them continues to be primarily personal, rather than one of researcher and subject. This situation has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, I have been able to learn and experience aspects of their lives and beliefs that an "outsider" could not, however, at the same time, I have found myself hesitant to delve into or question certain things about them that an outsider could more easily do.¹³

When I first ventured to India, I had no academic training in fieldwork or in the study of culture or religion. I also had no intention of staying more than a few months. With neither academic goals nor typical tourist interests to guide me, I was forced to find my own niche in my new religious and cultural environment. Looking for nothing in particular, I was fortunate to find a great deal. My early understanding of India and Hinduism developed primarily from personal experiences and the interpretations of *sadhhus* and villagers. My learning was guided by indigenous elements and approaches rather than academic theoretical constructs as tools for discernment.

The greater a researcher's ability to cognize and perceive a belief system

through indigenous understanding, the more successfully he or she can juxtapose it with academic perceptions in attempting to gain a broader viewpoint from which to observe the particular field of study. Many of the nuances and subtleties of a culture reveal deeper meanings to the people involved, but these are not always translated by informants, nor do they necessarily fit preconceived academic theories and methodological frameworks. Not having had previous exposure to such theories and frameworks at the time, I was naturally compelled to be open to indigenous understanding and categories in evolving concepts with which to absorb and interpret my observations and experiences. Later, this both helped and hindered me in my academic approach to my area of research, for the parameters of every methodology of learning have a tendency not only to reveal certain techniques of thinking and viewing, but also to obstruct, or at least downplay, alternate perspectives.

Seeing Differences, Seeing Prejudices

Most of the literature about the caste system in India has been written by either high-caste Indians or by foreigners whose primary sources have been high-caste Indians. This pattern began in the mid-1800s when British officials and Bengali *brahmans* dominated as authors of English-language literature on caste and society in India. In more than a century, the indigenous writing on caste has continued to be dominated by high-caste authors. Even the majority of Indian contributors to the popular and scholarly *Subaltern Studies* series, dealing with various issues of oppression in South Asia are from the *brahman* caste. Due to the nature of the caste system and its inherent social restrictions, *brahmans*, as a group, are probably the least likely of Indians to be able to have the kind of relationship with *harijans* that would facilitate comprehensive, objective studies of the latter. Although many high-caste scholars have been able to overcome such obstacles, many have not.

The fact that many researchers' informants are also high-caste can exacerbate the situation. In her first experience of fieldwork, Chie Nakane, author of the seminal *Japanese Society*, studied upper-caste village Bengali women. In her work, she came to realize most of them did not even know where the Untouchable women in their own village lived. Orthodox Hindu doctrine prohibits caste Hindus from having anything but the most distant and superficial contact and relationship with Untouchables. As a result, most caste-Hindu understanding of *harijans* and *harijan* life is fraught with inaccuracies and misconceptions. Yet, most caste Hindus do not perceive their limitation this way. An example of this can be found in *The Remembered Village*, by M. N. Srinivas, the well-respected Indian anthropologist. Referring to the beliefs in the village where he was doing research, and where he admittedly had next to no interaction with the *harijans* there,

I must reiterate that what I have written so far about the basic religious ideas of the villagers is drawn from my experience of the “touchable” Hindu castes. But I think that it is true of the Harijans also.¹⁴

This is a revealing statement, reflecting the assumption held by many upper-caste Hindus and scholars that they can know Untouchables—what they think, how they live—or even write extensively about them, without actually getting to know any of them.

As with so many non-Indians, my initial introduction to and understanding of the caste system was almost entirely provided me by high-caste acquaintances and friends. As the ones who benefit the most from this ancient cumbersome system of social and religious hierarchy, most high-caste Hindus consciously and unconsciously justify its existence, presenting biased, incorrect explanations and defenses for it. I was occasionally warned to avoid anything more than superficial contact with *harijans*, for, I was told, they are dirty, ignorant, immoral, untrustworthy, and/or unevolved beings whose religious beliefs and practices have little if any relationship to “true” Hinduism. I was also cautioned by many of my high-caste Hindu friends that it was not “proper” or “karmically” prudent for a *sadhu* to have a personal association with *harijans*. Hearing such viewpoints so often, I regrettably made little effort during my first years in India to associate with anyone I knew to be Untouchable.

Monks and ascetics tend to observe caste with more distance. With the exception of the acutely caste-conscious Shaivite *sannyasis*, who are predominantly from the *brahman* caste, most Hindu ascetics traditionally do not discuss their own caste background with anyone; it was and still is considered by many a taboo question for *sadhus*.¹⁵ Thus, many *sadhus* ignore the discussion of caste in their conversations with each other, and seldom bring up the issue of caste in their conversations with devotees and followers, unless specifically asked for advice, such as in the case of marriage alliances. Ramanandi *sadhus* like to see themselves as beyond the limitations of caste, it is one of the things they have renounced. For many of them, the renunciant/householder dichotomy is the socioreligious differentiation that tends to hold greater significance. In line with this, *sadhus* often adhere to this distinction in keeping a certain distance, either physical or social, between themselves and all householders, with the exception of those specifically initiated into their denomination. Such renunciants see close association with any householder as potentially polluting, since householders typically are much more lax in their adherence to purity/pollution rules and practices.

Over the years, my interest in spending time with lay villagers in various regions of North and Central India increased, and I sought to learn more about their life-styles and beliefs. As I began to develop friendships with various Untouchables and their families, it became exceedingly apparent that so much of what high-caste Hindus had told me about *harijans* was erroneous and pejorative.

As I mentioned earlier, most caste Hindus actually know very little about Untouchables, limited in the type of interaction they might have by strict social and religious prohibitions. This was, and still is, especially the case for most caste Hindus who adhere to orthodox brahmanical rules. Little did I know at the time that one of the primary vehicles for my further understanding of India and contemporary Hinduism would be Untouchables.

Meeting the Ramnamis

As a Ramanandi *sadhu*, two of the practices that became an integral part of my daily life were the chanting of the name of Ram and the study of the Ram story, especially its Hindi telling in the form of the *Rāmcaritmānas* of Tulsidas. For Ramanandis, this is the most sacred of scriptures, and many members devote their scriptural reading exclusively to the *Mānas*, as the *Rāmcaritmānas* is generally known. The chanting of the name of Ram is something a Ramanandi is expected to perform throughout the day, be it silently in meditation, as a chant, or in conjunction with one's other daily activities. Thus, the name and the story garnered a great deal of my focus and attention.

My first awareness of the Ramnami Samaj came in early 1972, when my father sent me a copy of the October 1971 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*. On the cover was a striking photograph of a woman whose face was covered with name "Ram" tattooed repeatedly in *devanagari* script.¹⁶ Because of this woman's obvious devotion to Ram, I was intrigued and felt compelled to find her and the group with which she was affiliated.¹⁷ At a religious festival in Haridwar in 1974, I had a brief encounter with a few Ramnamis but was not able to establish contact with the sect until January 1977, at the Kumbha Mela festival in Prayag (Allahabad). I spent the next several months with nearly two hundred members of the *samaj* and have been involved with the Ramnamis, on various levels, ever since.

My study of the Ramnamis is based on information gathered in ongoing research since 1977. I have made more than fifteen visits to Chhattisgarh, some lasting for only a few weeks, others for several months. In addition, I have spent months at a time with sect members traveling to and staying at a variety of pilgrimage and festival sites in North India. During my stays in Chhattisgarh, I have attended more than ten of the sect's annual festivals and numerous smaller ones. Over the years, I have stayed in or visited more than forty Chhattisgarhi villages, nearly all of which had at least a few resident Ramnami families. The population of several of these villages was over 95 percent *satnami* and nearly 80 percent Ramnami.¹⁸ In the early years, my primary modes of transportation in the region were oxcart, bicycle, and foot. Increasingly, however, dirt roads are being widened to permit the use of buses in the region, but such transportation is still relatively scant and predictably unreliable.

Each time I returned to Chhattisgarh, during the first decade after meeting the Ramnamis, I was struck by how little things appeared to change. Then, in 1986, the Madhya Pradesh government completed a vast hydroelectric project, and large areas of Chhattisgarh started to become electrified. It was only after their demise that I realized how many aspects of the culture and life-style there had persisted because of the lack of electricity. Lights opened up the night to increased activity, which, in turn, influenced the activities of the daytime. The life-styles of those who could afford electricity became increasingly disengaged from those who could not. Something as rudimentary as an electric flour mill in a village significantly altered the way food was prepared, the way it was eaten, the control women had over its production and storage, and even, to some extent, the balance of power between various members of a family. Further, electrification and industrialization, at least in the short run, have tended to diminish further the status of manual labor and thus of low castes, who usually perform such work. Because my current research has focused on marginalized groups of people, the negative effect of modernization on their lives is clearly more striking than the obvious short-term benefits for those who can afford to partake in them.

Much of my understanding of the Ramnamis has come from living with them in their villages and participating in their festivals. My initial relationship with most of my friends, acquaintances, and informants in Chhattisgarh was as a *sadhu*, and many have chosen to hold onto the parameters of that relationship in our continued friendship and interactions. Now that I am a householder and parent, however, I have been able to forge many new relationships, as well as add new dimensions to old ones. Obviously, my involvement with the Ramnamis has drastically altered my view of *harijans* and of the caste system in general. The more time I spend with Untouchables in North and Central India and the more I read caste studies written by high-caste Indians, the more it has become apparent to me that the views of *harijans* commonly held by most people, Indians and non-Indians alike, tend to be distorted and extremely limited. One can only suspect the degree to which political, economic, and racial considerations are the underlying bases for the continued promotion of stereotypic views of the low caste. Each caste, and even subcaste, is traditionally endogamous; each has traditionally tended to limit its association with members of other castes. The restrictions on socialization and interaction have resulted in the development of distinct ethnic and cultural groups, each with little actual knowledge of the others. While prejudice is diminishing in urban India, the conservative social environment prevalent in many rural areas and among the religious high caste make eliminating caste discrimination difficult. In many ways, the situation is similar to the impediments encountered in attempting to eliminate racial and ethnic prejudice in the United States.

In gathering information on the Ramnamis, the primary language I have

used is Uttar Pradeshi Hindi. Although the Chhattisgarhi dialect is quite distinct and I have developed a fairly good understanding of it, most Chhattisgarhi villagers today find ease in conversing in standardized Hindi. Moreover, it is the dialect taught in the region's schools and is slowly replacing Chhattisgarhi as the primary dialect of the non-tribal residents of the state. While the majority of the elderly village women still speak only the local dialect, many of their children and grandchildren increasingly speak only standardized Hindi. During the first several years of my relationship with the *samaj*, I had no intention of making them a part of any formal academic study. Nevertheless, my curiosity motivated me to ask various members a myriad of questions about their lives, longings, beliefs, practices, and so forth. I recorded many of the answers, along with my personal observations and reflections in the journals I have kept regularly while in India.¹⁹

Fortunately, I have been able to maintain regular contact with numerous Ramnami friends and informants during the last twenty-five years, and I have had an opportunity to ask many of the same questions over again. I have occasionally received variant and contradictory answers, sometimes coming from the same people. Some of the differences have obviously resulted from an increased understanding on my part of the Ramnamis' way of thinking, as well as from my informants' willingness to share with me aspects of their beliefs and themselves. Many of my adult informants were either mere children or not yet born when I first began studying the Ramnamis, so there has also been a generational change in my pool of sources and their ways of thinking.

Over the years, I have sought a variety of local individuals and groups to use as my primary contacts and sources for gaining information and understanding of Untouchable life and belief in Chhattisgarh. A few deserve specific mentioning here. Ramtaram Ramnami was one of my first Ramnami acquaintances.²⁰ He is an elder member of a *harijan* family and was a Ramnami leader (*sadasya*) for many years. His home has been one of my main residences during any lengthy stay in Chhattisgarh. He arranged my initial contacts with the sect and helped facilitate my access to the *sadasyas* and their council meetings. He has also been a primary informant on many of the sect's dimensions, generally providing a seasoned perspective on them and on the culture of the region. An elementary school teacher in his village served as my initial introduction to another important group of informants. Now numbering approximately two dozen, these teachers, both Untouchable and touchable from half a dozen different villages in the area, have provided me with local educators' views, the changing dynamics of caste interaction, and the increasing influence of secularization and Westernization on their region.

In 1980, I met a young *vaishya* engineer from Raipur at a Ramnami festival. He is from a well-to-do urban family and has long had an interest in rural India, frequently spending time in villages, attending a variety of religious and cultural activities. His family members are strong devotees of Ram, and they

have even invited Ramnamis to their home to perform their chanting rituals for them and their friends. In the process, they have shown sect members a great deal of kindness and respect and have openly ignored caste rules that restrict Hindus' relationships with Untouchables. The family members find justification for their actions in devotional teachings that explicitly disregard caste and class barriers for the true devotee. This family has also been my means of meeting a large number of upper-caste urban Hindus who eagerly participate in religious activities, yet openly criticize and ignore caste restrictions. The willingness of upper-caste Hindus and their families to interact with *harijans*, while still rare in rural areas, is increasing; it suggests a trend that is becoming more prevalent in urban India. Urbanization and secularization have reduced fears of retribution by one's own caste community for infringement of caste rules, such as those governing contact and commensality. Increasingly, urban Hindus ignore or even reject the rigid casteism found in most village areas. Urbanites are becoming more open to a Western, secular, social value system, in which caste rules play a diminished role. This is not to suggest that urban Hindus actively reject all caste boundaries; however, many now do question them and even ignore them. The only caste restrictions that seem to have remained largely intact in urban areas are those involving marriage, yet even these are no longer completely sacrosanct.

In looking at the Ramnamis and at contemporary low-caste religion, I have employed the work of a variety of early and contemporary Western Indologists, ethnographers, and anthropologists. Among these Edward Shils, McKim Marriott, Clifford Geertz, and Victor Turner have been especially helpful. However, using prevailing academic concepts, theories, and methodologies in interpreting and presenting my understanding of the Ramnamis has often proved frustrating for, while these tools inspire a great deal of insight, they can also mislead. It is necessary to consider the criticism directed at Western anthropology and the scholastic approach by indigenous scholars from cultures subjected to Western-style critique. Hussein Fahim asks,

Is anthropological instruction and training in the West actually producing scientific observers, or is it inadvertently transforming students with diverse cultural perspectives into practitioners of a standard Western anthropology of culture-bound models?²¹

Fahim presents a fascinating challenge: to interpret the ways of other peoples in a manner that is both scholastically rigorous and yet conducive to indigenous self-understanding. This can clearly be a daunting task. When one looks at the work of indigenous scholars, especially in India, it becomes clear that some of them suffer from the same kinds of socially and politically motivated ideological myopia that has distorted the work of some Western scholars and historians of

India. The social sciences provide unique tools with which to work; however, the way in which we choose to use them determines the outcome of our efforts. At times, none of the tools are right for the job, and we have to simply work bare-handed, without any pattern to follow. Hopefully, the background material presented above will help the reader better understand the context of, and conceptions that motivated this study.