

# The Household as History

Kumkum Roy (ed.) *Looking Within Looking Without: Exploring Households in the Subcontinent Through Time* (Essays in Memory of Nandita Prasad Sahai) (Delhi: Primus, 2015), Hardcover, Rs.1595

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The book under review raises many questions and queries about how much we know, and do not know, about the history of households as a social phenomenon in the subcontinent. Histories of households are indeed an unexplored terrain. The essays in this volume – covering a range of experiences from the ancient to the early modern period – are located within different intersecting disciplinary and sub-disciplinary spaces. The focus is on issues and concerns of relevance to readers interested in understanding the ‘household’ as an analytical category for history in particular, and questions of the marginalized in general.

Divided into six sections, the work covers a wide variety of themes woven around the historical experience of the household. In the first section, *Household Matters*, the archaeological excavations carried out jointly by Supriya Verma and Jaya Menon in the village of Indor Khera have provided evidence to explore the household as a site of economic production. Their article ‘*Mapping Histories and Practices of Potters’: Households in Ancient Indor Khera (200 BC-500 CE)*’ discusses this theme explicitly. A similar perspective, through economic history, is available in the essay by Rajat Dutta, though the essay figures later in the book. Dutta’s article, titled ‘*Towards an Economic History of Rural Households in Early Modern India: Some Evidence from Bengal in the Eighteenth Century*’, is able to show how rural households and markets were deeply connected.

In the second section, *The Meanings of Motherhood*, Martha Selby, Sally Goldman and Monica Juneja have employed textual strategies to read historical representations of motherhood. Drawing on early Ayurvedic literature, Martha Selby highlights the position of ‘*Women as Patients and Practitioners in Early Sanskrit Medical Literature*’. Selby has worked on two medical texts composed in Sanskrit (dated c. 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> CE). Through a close reading of the texts, Selby deals in great detail with the realms of gynecology,

maladies, gestational processes, anatomical difference, edema and abscess. She asserts that women played an active role in the production of medical knowledge in matters that were of special and direct concern to them. Sally Goldman on the other hand, has grappled with issues of conception, pregnancy and childbirth by looking at the last section of the *Ramayana*, the *Uttarakanda*. Throughout the epic, Sita is located within a patriarchal framework, her pregnancy erased from view. Several episodes clearly show that though she is pregnant, she can still be suspected of sexual infidelity. Goldman, in her essay ‘*Blessed Events: The Uttarakanda’s Construction of Sita’s Pregnancy*’, argues that Sita’s journey of exclusion from Ayodhya to the liminal space of Valmiki’s *ashrama* tells us about the inner tensions and silences that a woman has to go through. She is constantly reminded that a woman abandoned by her husband has no voice and identity.

The contributions made by Jaya Tyagi, Uma Chakravarti and R. Mahalakshmi in the third section, *Regulations and Representations*, bring out the dynamics of the household from varied references to it in texts like the *Manavadharmashastra*, *Matsya Mahapurana*, *Mahabharata* and *Tirukkural*. Tyagi, in her essay ‘*The Dynamics of the Early Indian Household: Domesticity, Patronage and Propriety in Textual Traditions*’, discusses the patterns of continuity and change in the experience of women as depicted in the *Manavadharmashastra* and *Matsya Mahapurana*. She contends that while the *Manusmriti* forbade women from undertaking any religious activity, the *Puranas* gave them an inclusive space, as reflected in the *vrata-katha* tradition. In this way, women were able to negotiate spaces for themselves and were able to come out of the confines of the household. Though the *Puranas* upheld traditional hierarchy and divisions in the social structure like the *Manusmriti*, they simultaneously allowed women to undertake ritual observances and extended

their agency. Tyagi goes on to show that *Grhyasutras*, *Puranas* and *Buddhist* texts espouse the *pativrata* ideology. They reiterate the idea that in elite households, women competed with each other, and not men, for conjugal rights, share in household resources and progenies.

Mahalakshmi's essay, titled 'Woman and Home in the Tirukkal: The Normative Construction of the Family in the Tamil Region in the Middle of First Millenium CE' (the Tamil Veda), posits that the issue of women's sexuality is a theme common to all classical texts, be it the *Manusmriti* or popular prescriptive literature. Such ideas, she argues, are depicted within a universalist frame.

Uma Chakravarti's article, 'A *Sutaputra* in a Royal Household: The Kshatriya World of Power and its Margins', explores the story of a *sutaputra* (Karna) in the *Mahabharata*, through themes of genealogy, lineage building and patrilineal descent. This story should leave an abiding mark on the minds of the readers. The very fact that Kunti conceals the real identity of Karna as a Kshatriya leaves Karna condemned as a *sutaputra* and has far-reaching consequences for him in the public realm.

The essays related to religion deal with the inner and outer spaces of the household within medieval devotional traditions. Section four – *The Sacred and the Profane* – opens up different genres of sources. In 'Households Profane and Divine: Perceptions of Sainly Wives', Vijaya Ramaswamy incisively argues that the idea of bridal mysticism cuts across gender and religion. She gives us vivid descriptions of Lal Ded, Meera and Akka Mahadevi, who crossed the threshold of the profane in their households. In marked contrast to these women renouncers, Ramaswamy talks about Bahina Bai, who continued to live in a patriarchal household but found freedom in its spiritual spaces.

This idea aligns well with the views presented by Pius Malekandathil in his article 'Women, Church and the Syrian Christian Households in Pre-Modern Kerala' on how spaces for Syrian Christian women were created in pre-modern Kerala. Pius contends that the Church gave considerable latitude to Syrian Christian women to carve a niche for themselves by participating in the multiple activities it organized. Though these women were given the right to assert their freedom, it was acceptable only within the parameters set by men. The spaces of men, Pius says, were about brightness, laughter and visibility, but that for women were designed in such a way that they were dark, dull and grim. The churches of Ramapuram, Kolencherry and Karakunnam were not merely religious institutions but institutional mechanisms to assert the position and pride of the family which ultimately led to the submission of women.

Kumkum Roy's essay 'Worlds Within and Worlds Without: Representations of the Sangha in 'Popular' Tradition' is a welcome reminder that the *sangha* represented a

distinctive framework vis-à-vis the domestic world. Roy also explores how the *sangha's* residential space would have had similarities with the worldly household. Like Roy's essay, Ranjeeta Dutta's work 'Consensus and Control: The Mathas, Household and Religious Devotion in Medieval South India', in a section of the book titled *Cross Currents*, and through a study of Tamil texts, focuses on the institution of the *matha* within the Shrivaisnava tradition in the second millennium CE. While the *matha* functions within the institution of the household, she demonstrates how the *matha* used the household as a space to regulate kinship and caste relations. Rosalind O'Hanlon highlights a different set of issues in the context of the household in 18<sup>th</sup> century Maharashtra. Focusing on western India, where society was shaped by the state of the Maratha Peshwas, this essay ('Disciplining the Brahman Household; The Moral Mission of Empire in the Eighteenth-Century') gives details of the disciplining of the Brahmin household by the Brahmin rulers of the Maratha state themselves. The attempt to enforce these norms, says O'Hanlon, offers us a series of insights into the state's agenda to carry out a cultural and social mission within an expanding imperial framework.

In her essay 'Crossing the Golden Gate? Sunars, Social Mobility and Disciplining the Household in Early Modern Rajasthan', in the section *Wider Webs*, Nandita Sahai acknowledges that the growth of the *Sunar* community over the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a pan-Indian phenomenon. Although the status of the *Sunars* was very fluid, she maps out the way in which this community used the court and other public arenas for advertising their customs and traditions. The most intriguing dimension of the essay is when Sahai shows us how realignment in household practices was contested yet harmonized during these phases.

In terms of methodology, the book exhibits an array of approaches. This enables us to explore different dimensions of the household, embedded as it has historically been in wider social, political and economic networks. However, the essays in the book operate at so many levels and around such disparate themes that it often becomes difficult for the reader to get a comprehensive perspective on the household. The contributors have engaged with concerns about caste, the intersections between kingship and household, archaeology and public architecture. Some of the essays raise concerns about religious beliefs and practices, and the reading of colonial records, but the challenge to integrate these varied themes remains. The book will however interest students of History, Sociology, Gender and Women.

Chronologically, the book spans a period from the mid-first millennium BCE to the eighteenth-century CE. The regions explored include the Gangetic valley, Tamil

country, Kerala, Maharashtra, Bengal, and Rajasthan. Yet the conjunction of time and terrain is episodic, so that the diverse specificity of time-space cases impedes the exercise of tracing change and continuity.

It is to be noted that the volume has looked through varied sources like archaeology, visual representations, the epics, varieties of texts in regional languages, technical medical treatises, inscriptions and official documents like court records. The book reconstructs, and deconstructs,

the dynamics of the household in a very perceptive way. However, a comparison of the various sources, located within different genres and chronologies, makes the themes, ideas and conclusions rather dispersed. Also, the myriad approaches adopted by the authors, with their different perspectives, specificities and debates, undermine the possibility of making any profound philosophical point about the household as a historical and social phenomenon.

# Modern Yoga, Consumer Culture and Religion

Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 240 pp. \$ 20.95

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Andrea Jain's book is located within the corpus of scholarly work that has emerged over the last two decades around the phenomenon of 'modern Yoga'. The central problematic this literature seeks to address is the emergence of Yoga as it now exists in such contexts as Yoga studios across the world. There are two aspects to this work: one is to demonstrate the break between premodern and modern forms of Yoga, and the other is to examine the global processes whereby the latter has come to function the way it does. In doing this, various analytic possibilities have been brought to bear on the question of 'modern Yoga', and the book also reflects on the ways in which we might define religion, and the extent to which modern forms of Yoga can be called religion.

Jain's work, coming after various authors have already set out the broader narrative of what is termed modern or 'postural' Yoga, is able to explore one significant aspect of the history of Yoga in detail: its journey from being an 'elite' 'counterculture' activity for the first several decades of its existence in the West to becoming a popular and easily accessible experience today. In doing this, Jain utilizes the idea of 'continuity with consumer culture'. *Selling Yoga* is remarkable for its ability to bring conceptual clarity not only with the study of 'primary' material, but also in the analysis of and response to secondary literature.

The first chapter of Jain's book surveys 'premodern yoga systems' in an attempt to demonstrate how premodern Yogis of any persuasion were 'hardly the images we tend to envision when we think of modern practitioners of Yoga' (p 19). More significantly, this chapter puts forth one of the central theses of Jain's argument – that premodern Yoga was different from contemporary versions because it grew in a different context, which is to say, what has been common to Yoga across centuries has been the fact that it has understandably always been determined by changing sociocultural circumstances.

Modern Yoga, Jain explains in the second chapter, grew out of 'encounters' between Yoga reformers from India and Westerners engaged in 'metaphysics to fitness' (p 21), and modern social phenomena. Much of this section looks at early engagements with Yoga in the West and the reception of Yoga there, discussing some tendencies that the encounter with Yoga brings out about Western sociocultural history. Until the middle of the twentieth century, modern Yoga was 'countercultural, elite, or scandalous' (p 41), writes Jain. It is possibly also an important aspect of the history of 'religion' in nineteenth and early twentieth century United States, as it served as a counterpoint to religious doctrines which had a somewhat broader yet mundane and conservative appeal at the time.

The factors which determined the success of late twentieth century modern/postural Yoga are summarized by Jain in terms of issues relating to government policy (opening up of immigration restrictions), prevailing attitudes towards existing religions, consequently the relative ease with which gurus 'enter(ed) the market', and the way consumer culture functioned. Also then, religious identity is conceivable as 'bricolage' in a modern context. The shift which takes place in this period is that Yoga is no longer counterculture, but pop culture.

Jain contrasts modern/postural Yoga with modern 'soteriological Yoga' to explain why the former became popular in the late twentieth century. The examples she uses of the former to illustrate her point include the Siddha Yoga of Swami Muktananda and Preksha Dhyana of Mahaprajna. Jain holds that the reason modern/postural yoga became more successful in the market was because it does not require a lifelong commitment or any radical shift in worldview, and allows direct access. Weaving theoretical analysis deftly into her narrative, she also reads this in terms of continuity with consumer

culture. In 'Branding Yoga', she narrates the example of John Friend's Anusara Yoga, which she calls a 'second-generation Yoga brand' (whereas Siddha Yoga or Iyengar Yoga are first generation). She discusses the relationship between consumption and Yoga, and brand and meaning.

Jain's fifth chapter takes a cue from something she says in the preceding one, where she observes that surrender to a guru is not easily distinguishable 'qualitatively or quantitatively' from surrender to a brand (p 93). The chapter is focused on explaining how modern/postural Yoga may be thought of as a 'body of religious practice'. She develops her argument mostly as a critique of Jeremy Carrette and Richard King's *Selling Spirituality*. In response to their position (and that of many other academics and non-academics) that certain forms of modern/postural Yoga are 'mere commodity', she argues that this position ignores the emic perspective on modern/postural Yoga. She then goes on to address Carrette and King directly, demonstrating that their position on postural Yoga is based on an essentialist, reified understanding of religion. According to Jain, Carrette and King mistakenly take the view that religion is clearly distinct from and opposed to the profane, is 'good' and also *sui generis* (p 102).

Jain's critical response to Carrette and King depends on Mircea Eliade's idea of hierophany, meaning 'manifestation of the sacred', and her example is the 'body' in Iyengar Yoga. The increasing lack of distinction between the sacred and the material, she points out, is the 'dominant ontology of consumer culture', as Hugh Urban demonstrates (p 104). Postural Yoga, rather than lacking religious and philosophical content, then reflects the 'dominant religio-philosophical mode of consumer culture'. In response to the possible argument that postural Yoga concerns itself only with personal salvation, she brings up the religious problem of human pain and suffering. Her discussion of the question presents an interesting engagement with Preksha Dhyana in North America. On a second point, she draws attention to the fact that the 'religious' need not be ethical: indeed, according to Eliade, Yoga may, on the contrary, be 'antisocial' and 'antihuman' (p 120). Further, she points out that it might be a problem to project back a modern conception of social justice onto ancient systems. Finally, she argues that religion is, in fact, *not sui generis*.

In the sixth chapter, she looks at Orientalist presumptions regarding Yoga which inform both those who think of it as 'theirs' because it is 'Hindu', as well as Christian groups who oppose it on religious grounds precisely for being Hindu. She argues that

both the positions emerge from consumer culture, a space which they share in common with postural Yoga itself. Critiquing the idea of an unchanging essence, she posits that protests espouse a 'distorted history' which 'serves a fierce will to power' (p 156). Finally, she brings together the various threads running through her work to emphasize the ideas of context-sensitivity, diversity and the absence of an essence or centre.

While Jain's account is internally consistent, and she certainly accomplishes what she sets out to do quite effectively, her work inspires at least two questions. One is her discussion of etic versus emic views. In her preface, Jain speaks of her experience with the Jain community (pp xiv-xv). When, to the community, she claims that she is 'Jain, but not Jain', distinguishing her last name from religious identity, the community's response is usually one of dismissal. Jain reads this, perceptively, as stemming from their *karma* centred ontology, which leads them to deny that her sociocultural context and experiences shape her. Two processes of translation can be observed here: the Jain community's translation of Jain's claim into a system that is comprehensible to them, and Jain's translation of their dismissal into an analytic which is comprehensible to her and her audience. In a sense, her reading of postural Yoga through ideas of consumer culture is also an act of translation. While one of her criticisms of Carrette and King is that they are dismissive of emic views in their critique of some versions of Yoga, it is not certain to what extent Yoga practitioners would agree with the way she populates the category of 'religion' as she applies it to them. Similarly, her reading of twentieth century Yoga organizations as less or more successful due to their continuity or otherwise with consumer culture presents an ontology which would find itself at variance with that of practitioners of many soteriological Yoga traditions. This is an interesting problem with which she does not engage as sensitively as it might be expected.

The other, related point is that while it is true that Carrette and King appear to reify the category of religion, she appears to miss the point of *Selling Spirituality*, which is in fact a *critique* of consumer culture. The book, if not a call for action itself, certainly judges traditions in terms of the extent to which they may be critically effective.

That said, Jain's work is a persuasive analysis of modern Yoga in terms of consumer culture and emphasizes the context-specificity of yoga, raising some critical points but also providing an analytical structure for further study of an important phenomenon of modern cultural experience.

# The Chinese Puzzle

Pallavi Aiyar, *Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of China* (New Delhi: Fourth Estate, 2008), pp. 273, Paperback, Rs.450

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Written in 2008, Pallavi Aiyar's *Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of China* remains as relevant today as then, even though the pace of change in China has been unusually rapid. Written like an extended diary, reflections on her 5-year stint in China from 2002 onward (working as an English language instructor first, and then journalist), Aiyar's book is at a deeper level a document about the human condition in one of humankind's greatest revolutions – the transformation of China in our time. But the book is also as much about India as it is about China, two peoples joined by geography, history and culture, but also, from the Indian side, anxiety about its resurgent neighbor. Aiyar writes for an India unable to fully grasp what is happening in China, sometimes comparing the two, at other times, more directly if also a little simplistically asking: what could India learn from China? (p. 239). For someone who has just returned from a trip to China, many years after Aiyar lived there, I believe that in many ways the questions are still the same except that the lag on the Indian side has become more comprehensive, acute and exasperating. Here, I will not dwell on Indian anxieties about China. We live it all the time. My focus, as a historian, will be to read *Smoke and Mirrors* as a document of history, a kind of ethnographic history of the everyday in fast-changing China, where the author, in her perceptive, sensitive and evocative prose, weaves a picture of a society in transition. Her wit and humor add an aspect of irony to her prose that is remarkable.

The first chapter (pp. 10-27) – *Better Fat than Anapple* – deals with Aiyar's introduction to China, primarily through her interaction with her students at the Beijing Broadcasting Institute, where she first comes face to face with the puzzle that is China. Writes Aiyar: 'The China I lived in was a communist country in name but a strange hybrid in practice...students sat through compulsory

classes in Marxism and Maoist thought, bored blind, fantasizing of little but money' (pp.15-16). Her struggle with the language, amusement at finding that young people learning English invariably take funny English names, realization of how deep they had been socialized into being apolitical, and (almost) horror at discovering the women students' bizarre fixation with large eyes, among other things, give us a sense of how strange and mixed-up a place China appears at first glance.

From her work place, Aiyar eases us out into the streets of Beijing, the city which was to be her home in China, a city in the grip of a huge make-over for the Olympics in 2008, a prestige event that the Chinese government, already in the midst of supervising the massive transformation of its cities, was bent upon making a success at all costs. This chapter – *Olympian Makeover* (pp. 28-50) – tracks the demolition of a very large part of historic Beijing, 25 million square meters, and the creation of a swanky new city with a Central Business District, 'the capitalist core of the communist capital' (p. 28). According to Aiyar, 'the pace of the current transformation was unbeatable as was its reach, as it pushed into every nook and corner, bulldozing its way into even Mongol-period enclaves that had so far miraculously remained intact' (p. 37). In this city in the throes of an 'identity crisis' (p. 36), the Chinese people, observes Aiyar, used to the 'ceaseless impermanence' and 'flux (p. 39)' of their recent past, showed a certain 'equanimity' that 'would have made the Buddha proud' (Ibid.).

In the next chapter, titled *Coronavirus* (pp. 51-70), the writer comes to grips with the Chinese government's obstinate refusal, shored up through censorship and socialization, to first recognize the SARS epidemic, then its volte-face in the face of aggravated circumstances, and the subsequent scramble for damage control. Stunned, Aiyar

notes 'the manner in which students violently oscillated from complete trust in the authorities to hysterical suspicion' (p.60), and the fact that 'the whole country was like a pressure cooker, calm on the top but boiling inside' (ibid.). Though horrified at the state's response, Aiyar also recognizes, in the state's belated acknowledgement of the crisis, that its power eventually lay in fostering an 'uninterrupted illusion that the CCP's continuing rule was essential and beneficial for all sections of Chinese society' (ibid.). Alongside this meditation on the Chinese state, Aiyar brings alive in these pages the panic that gripped the city, with vignettes about the odd and pathetic acts of both the state and the people to safeguard themselves from the disease, like rubbing vinegar on the walls of buildings, playing badminton feverishly, and killing pets and dogs suspected of carrying the virus.

In *Hindi-Chini Buy Buy* (pp. 69-96), Aiyar busts the myth of the China-India comparison, pointing to not just the huge, almost unbridgeable distance between the two countries, but also the surprisingly small economic relationship between the neighbors in relation to the hype. But yes, she finds out, there is indeed a growing exploration by Indians of the opportunities in China, whether it be high level diplomatic and business visits from the subcontinent or the modest adventures of Indian yogis, students and mofussil jobseekers in China's bustling cities.

With the following two chapters – *Mr. Wu and Family* (pp. 94-114) and *Hutong Days* (pp. 115-125) – Aiyar opens an absolutely riveting window into the life of Beijingers in the *hutong* neighborhoods and their *siheyuan* homes in the Chinese capital. *Hutongs* are 'essentially willow-lined villages hidden away from the surrounding urban sprawl' (p. 95), comprising a network of small alleys and courtyard homes that were once the residences of the imperial elite. Although large sections of the *hutongs* have been demolished to make way for the new, glitzy Olympic City, a few have been preserved as souvenirs of Beijing's 'historic district'. The *Hutong*-scape of Beijing bears the scars and spirit of China's turbulent history, having witnessed the eviction of the old elite, resettlement as a proletarian complex with public toilets, and the recent make-over as a tourist curio even as its oldest inhabitants await another dislocation. Through the idiosyncratic behavior of her landlord Wu, perpetually repairing the house, the laid-back domestic rhythms of *hutong* residents, and the lively community entertainment and gossip sessions of the area, Aiyar evokes a China at once in the throes of change and as placid as ever. She writes: 'I loved the communality that infused the *hutongs*... Overfull quarters forced people out to the streets and through the changing seasons residents bundled together outdoors, exchanging gossip, playing mahjong, quaffing beers on steamy hot summer nights or just watching the

world go by' (p. 5). During my recent visit to Beijing, I too stayed for a few days in a *siheyuan* now converted into a hotel, and much has – miraculously and thankfully – remained the same.

Passing over the comedies that beset Indian businessmen as they struggle with Chinese food in the chapter *Chicken Feet and Jain Diets* (pp. 126-136), Aiyar delves deeper into the economic miracle that is China in *Factory of the World* (pp. 137-168) and the recent freedoms in religious life in *Opiate of the Masses* (pp. 169-200). On the former, Aiyar observes that Chinese entrepreneurship has often led rather than followed economic liberalization. Given the tumultuous history of the last century, unsure of whether anything will ever last, the 'people', Aiyar quotes a local, 'don't think they get another chance in life... if (they) get an opportunity (they) grab it, tightly, it may be the only one (they) get' (p. 165). On the question of religion, Aiyar believes that faced with 'yawning inequalities, vanishing provisions for education and healthcare, unpaid wages and pensions and rampant official corruption, and disenchantment across large sections of Chinese society... the party (CCP) was thus coming to realize that (religion) may be an opiate, but opiates soothe tensions and calm frayed nerves' (p. 176). Popular religiosity has thus been allowed to grow. During my visit to China's largest mosque in Xian and a Buddhist temple in Shanghai, I too was struck by public notices that spoke of how the government was providing funds for the upkeep of these shrines in keeping with the (*re*)correct(ed) policies of protecting cultural minorities.

In *Shangrila* (pp. 201-2013), Aiyar visits Zhongdian, indeed billed by tourism publicity as 'Shangrila', a largely Tibetan area bordering the Tibet Autonomous Region; and in the *Roof of the World* (pp. 2013-234), she finds herself on board the first train into Lhasa. It is here that she confronts the Chinese puzzle at its most frustrating point, something that leads her, but for the epilogue, to her final substantial chapter *Squaring the Circle and Coming Full Circle* (pp. 235-262), where, in the light of her experience of disaffection among the Tibetans, she ponders over the heart of the matter. Having lifted millions out of poverty in perhaps one of the biggest transformations of our age, created a society where education, health, dignity of labor, women's rights and civic behavior were the norm, provided local social and political freedoms, was the CCP's asking for too much in its demand for total loyalty from all its peoples? Conversely, was India's democracy worthless in the light of the Indian state and peoples' failures in giving themselves a decent life? Given that the promises of political freedom and social equality in India have repeatedly been belied, more so in the present day, I can understand why even in 2007, Aiyar was unable to decide.