

## Review

*Saivism in the Diaspora. Contemporary Forms of Skanda Worship*, by Ron Geaves. London, Oakville: Equinox, 2007. viii + 312 pp., £49.50 (hb), £60. ISBN 10 1845532341 (hb), 13 9781845532345 (hb).

*Saivism in the Diaspora* is a book filling many gaps in both South Asian studies and Religious Studies. By means of a great expertise in theories and methods in the study—and I will add, in teaching—religions, the author moves from personal investigations to analyse individual and community narratives, and ultimately designs innovative research methodology. Besides presenting little known and new fascinating ethnographic material, Geaves develops a more sophisticated approach to the study of Indic religions through an insightful analysis of grey zones between scriptural and vernacular traditions and the development of established regional forms of worship in cross-cultural environments.

The book investigates, in twelve chapters, the worship of Siva and Saivite deities in India (Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu), Sri Lanka and their relocation in Britain. Fieldwork, which happens to be the main research method (p. 10), allows a vibrant examination of the two main sources of information (Saiva scriptural and oral traditions in India and UK), while accurate endnotes and a detailed bibliographical apparatus encourage further developments in many subject areas.

This reviewer finds particularly stimulating the way the relation between ‘institutional’ and ‘folk/popular’ religions has been investigated. After a comprehensive and critical examination of the subject in academic circles, the book privileges an emic reading where categories such as ‘tradition’ and ‘religion’ are experienced as porous realities. Moving from an analysis of Orientalist efforts to box religions to Srinivas’ ‘Sanskritization’ theory and its critiques, the book explores how religion—in its broader context—should be studied as a borderless reality. Mapping religions can be a dangerous exercise, often suggesting neo-colonialist tendencies. Mastering sociological theories in the study of religions and developing interesting arguments within postcolonial (and subaltern) studies as well as Diaspora and relocation studies, the author discusses labels such as ‘faith’ and ‘religion’ in South Asia as powerful cultural signifiers.

The book adheres coherently to this interpretation and shows how in reality members belonging to different communities perform and believe in the same way. The further theoretical step leads us to consider *karma*, rather than *dharma*, as a source of identity in a religious context. By focusing on performance rather than creed, the author suggests religious boundaries cease to exist when shared matters of concern are at stake. After information on deities has been contextualized, the Gujarati, Punjabi and Tamil devotional ways are examined. It is of particular interest to find that in the realm of ‘practical religion’ there is no reference to *varnasramadharmā*, *pap*, and *punya*, while *moksa* is mentioned only in scriptures or devotional stories (p. 120). The author shows how Skanda-Murugan devotees, in Britain as well as in India, tend to adhere to religious patterns aiming to resolve individual and social crises through healing.

Devotees engage in non-scriptural practices such as hook-swinging, piercing of the body, prolonged fasting, long marches, stepping of burning charcoals and dancing to exhaustion so as to be 'possessed', a way to achieve contact with the deity and at the same time to fulfil a vow.

The author then examines how Punjabi devotion to Baba Balaknath (a regional form of Skanda) is shared by Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs. According to early and more recent ethnographies this form of worship was expressed in terms of neither ethnic nor religious belonging, yet political issues (the birth of India and Pakistan and the rise of Sikh nationalism) and the consolidation of a Punjabi Diaspora, built and reinforced boundaries. While Khalsa Sikhs want the community to maintain a distance from practices labelled as 'Hindu', it is possible to observe how the worship of Baba Balaknath actually works as a community binder for British Punjabis. This is also evident in the Indian context, where sites of pilgrimage show elements of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim piety. The same seems to happen in Sri Lanka, despite the efforts of the Buddhist Sinhalese majority to get primacy over Murugan worship and local centres of pilgrimage.

It is precisely the lack of boundaries between forms of Saivism that fascinates not only the lay reader but also those familiar with Indic traditions. The author intrigues us with a captivating narrating style and relates personal experiences among devotees in UK and India. As a fieldworker himself, this reviewer particularly welcomes the descriptions of Punjabi pilgrimages, places of worship of Murugan in South India and Sri Lanka and, not least, Saivite temples in UK. These ethnographies are wisely introduced by a general introduction on Siva and his family (relevant details are taken from both oral narratives and Sanskrit and vernacular scriptures, e.g. Saiva Puranas), iconography and worshipping patterns.

At the end of the book (ch. 11), a further case-study is brought to the attention of the reader: the Community of the Many Names of God in Skanda Vale (Wales). This last ethnography ideally concludes the book by showing how Indic patterns of worship adapt to local contexts. Though one may think the ecumenical features of this community (elements from different Indic traditions as well as other religions, mainly Christianity, are present) may keep *desi* involvement away, the author reports Indians from near and far British locations travel to Skanda Vale to spend more or less long stays (alone or in family) in order to celebrate festivals, meditate or attend *pujas*, thus reinforcing the inclusive aspect of religion in practice.

The book offers a valuable and fresh insight into contemporary forms of Saiva worship and successfully contextualizes them in a wider discourse on theories and methods in the study of religions. By focusing on ritual and faith as performances, the author confirms the validity of the ethnographic method and contributes to a burgeoning literature of South Asian traditions explored as living experiences. Further, the book is a welcome contribution in the area of Saiva studies, especially since Vaisnavism and Saktism seem to be more popular objects of investigation among academics and researcher.

To conclude, it is the impression of this reviewer that the author has a lot more to say on this subject. Therefore, he looks forward to further publications of this kind and believes the book will be a useful source of scholarship for students and scholars of Indic religions.

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