

INDIA

BABB, LAWRENCE A. *Redemptive Encounters. Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition*. Comparative Studies in Religion and Society. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987. xiv+257 pages. Glossary, references, index. Cloth US\$29.95; ISBN 0-520-05645-0.

For centuries Western scholars have marvelled at the remarkable strength of the Hindu tradition in its various manifestations. More often than not, scholars have traditionally been fascinated by the "frozen" forms of the Hindu tradition. Many disciplines have thoroughly studied these "frozen" forms and the mass of textual data which represented such forms. However, very few scholars, if any, have studied the Hindu tradition as a forceful living phenomenon—the continuation of an ancient tradition—in modern Indian society. Lawrence Babb's interesting book *Redemptive Encounters* is a serious attempt in which these continuities, in their various styles, have been captured and vividly described, so that the deep diachronic structures of the Hindu tradition could be realized and explained successfully.

The book thoroughly studies the three modern religious movements of (i) *Radhasoami* (ii) *Brahma Kumaris* and (iii) *Satya Sai Baba*. The first two movements are established in the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent and do not have followers in the predominantly Dravidian South. The third movement of the *Satya Sai Baba* is based in South India, being directed from Puttaparti (Andhra Pradesh), and has followers all over India, in virtually every town.

Redemptive Encounters has four parts. Part one describes the origin, growth and development of the *Radhasoami* movement, especially its original Agra version and the subtradition which developed in Panjab. Similarly, part two of the book concentrates on the *Brahma Kumaris* movement. This religious movement in modern India, according to Babb, is essentially "... millenarian. This is unusual in the Hindu world and indeed is regarded by some scholars as antithetical to the inner spirit of Indic religions. The *Brahma Kumaris*, not only show us that Hindu millenarianism is possible, but demonstrates *how* it is possible" (8). Besides, this religious movement has had, from its start, according to Babb, a distinctly feminist coloring which is exceptional in the Hindu tradition and as such deserves a different scholarly treatment than given so far.

The third part of the book deals with the so-called "cult" of *Satya Sai Baba*. According to the criterion developed by the author to distinguish a religious "movement" from a "cult," *Satya Sai Baba's* style of the Hindu tradition does not qualify for a religious movement because it is highly individualized and is primarily based on the miracles performed by the much celebrated holy man Sai Baba, rather than on a definite world view which is so central to a religious movement. However, the investigations carried on and presented in this book do not seem to justify this distinction made by the author. For example, the so-called "cult" of *Satya Sai Baba* seems to possess all such characteristics which are, according to the author, central to a religious movement. The very fact that this "cult" has found place among the three modern styles of Hinduism justifies its strength as a movement and, perhaps, as strong a movement as the *Radhasoami* or the *Brahma Kumaris*. This movement may not necessarily share all the aspects of the philosophy of the other two movements, but it does present a philosophical frame of its own which, by and large, represents the hard core of the ancient Hindu tradition. The concepts of soul and *punarjanam* (rebirth), the *yuga* (time) and the awakened vision which can penetrate both diachronic and

synchronic time (in fact the basic theory for *Satya Sai Baba's* miracles) and similar concepts form the broad outline of a strong world view which makes it a religious movement rather than a cult.

The last part of the book deals with the central theme—the issue of deep continuities. The author establishes, beyond doubt, the fundamental unity in these three modern styles of Hinduism and the single source all these derive from. In this respect, then, these three modern styles demonstrate the continuity of the basic core of Hindu religion, world view, and philosophy of life. Although one cannot fail to see that the belief system of these three movements are different, yet they can only be understood properly in the wider context of Hinduism. The author very neatly explains the basic “images” of Hindu religious culture which are present in these three modern styles. For example, plurality, cyclical history or the theory of *yuga* (world time), ingesting or identification and union with the objects of worship, seeing or awakened vision in which one sees himself and others “as souls not as bodies”; and last but not the least, self realization. These basic concepts of the Hindu tradition are then the elements which continue to shape these modern religious movements and link them very appropriately to the wider context of the ancient Hindu tradition. It is, however, not very clear from the present study why the author chose these three modern religious styles. For instance, if the number of followers was one of the basic criterion of this choice, then the strong movement of *Santōshi Mātā* could, perhaps, form a big part of the present study. Similarly, if continuity of the basic Hindu religious metaphor was the main consideration then *Anand Mārg* could not, perhaps, be ignored. However, whatever the reasons for this choice, one thing is very clear—that the subject of continuities in Indian tradition has received little attention from both Western and Indian scholars. In that respect then, Babb's volume is very important and a departure from earlier anthropological concerns about the Indian subcontinent. I myself have been intrigued by the subject of continuities, particularly the presence of strong epic themes in the modern context of Indian society. One such ancient theme is *Padayātrā* (cross country “long-walks” undertaken by important men as an important method for socio-political awareness and change in modern India), which, I believe, is always associated with the cultural heroes in ancient Indian epics. *Rāmāyana*, for example, raises a variety of questions about the personality, role, and powers of a ruler or a king and the system he controls. Needless to say, the dichotomy of the cultivated/non-cultivated (in Lévi-Straussian terms nature/culture or even city/village) which seems a dominant culture category of India's folk mind even today, has shaped the structure of kingship in *Rāmāyana*. Rāmā in his role as a culture hero seems to successfully mediate this basic opposition in order to redefine the role and power of a just king and the politics of unification.

One should also remember that in *Mahābhārata* as well, despite its dissimilarities with *Rāmāyana*, kingship—true kingship—was defined only in terms of overcoming this basic dichotomy. Pandavas had to roam in the wilderness (just as Rāmā did) before they could establish the real order of kingship based on justice and honesty. One can very easily discover the continuity of this metaphor in the social and cultural context of modern India. For example, didn't Mahatma Gandhi and Vinobhaji (in recent years, Jaya Prakash Narayan, Chandra Shekhar, Baba Amte, Sunil Dutt, and many more) follow in the footsteps of these epic heroes in mediating this still-present opposition in Indian systems? That the concept of *Padayātrā* as a very effective tool of social change has its well defined roots in the ancient epics of India is an issue of the continuity of traditional metaphor in the modern context of Indian society and deserves more serious treatment than given so far by scholars.

Indian society, unlike Western societies, is a past-oriented society in which consciously or unconsciously attempts are made to interpret the present with the help of the golden past. Therefore it is natural to see the continuation of the traditional metaphor in every aspect of modern Indian life. *Redemptive Encounters* traces these continuities in a systematic manner in the present religious thought of India. The book should, therefore, inspire similar studies in other equally important areas of Indian culture and civilization.

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EWING, KATHERINE P., editor. *Shari'at and Ambiguity in South Asian Islam. Comparative Studies in Muslim Societies, volume 4.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. xiii+321 pages. Hardcover US\$37.50; ISBN 0-520-05575-6.

The present volume is a collection of papers which were originally prepared for a conference held at Pendle Hill Conference Center in Pennsylvania, May 22-24, 1981. It forms part of a larger effort sponsored by the Joint Committee on South Asia of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies to understand moral values and sources of authority in South Asian Islam. This publication thus follows the first volume in the same programme, edited by Barbara D. Metcalf under the title *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (1984).

Both publications illustrate impressively the remarkable progress that has been made over the past three decades in the study of Islam in South Asia, especially with regard to the integration of anthropological-sociological approaches into an understanding of Muslim realities and of Islam that integrates the methodologies and questions of preponderantly textbased, normative and of largely fieldwork-based, empirical enquiry.

The volume comprises fourteen studies by fourteen different authors two of whom are based in South Asia. The others teach in North America. The contributions have been grouped in three parts. The three studies of part one deal with *shari'at*, custom and legal change and detail debates over the institutionalization of Islamic principles, the six essays of part two address changing idioms of political discourse and discuss religious legitimacy, leadership and popular mobilization whereas the five papers of part three address themselves to the negotiating of community boundaries and codes of personal behavior. The map on page four helpfully shows the wide range of locations discussed by the authors, reaching from Baluchistan in the west to the eastern borders of Bangladesh and from the Punjab in the north to Bombay in the southwest. One study, exceptionally, deals with events, earlier in this century, in Kelantan and therefore Southeast Asia. The central and southern regions of South Asia are not represented.

In the given short space we can hardly do better than restating a few selected points made by the editor in her quite brilliant introductory essay which summarizes analytically, discusses and "places," as it were, the contributions of the participants in the conference as well as of the essays published in the present volume. The focal point of the publication is the relationship between codes for behavior derived from