

Part 2, "Kurukṣetra," is especially helpful for delineating and then interpreting the many comparisons and contrasts between the regional and classical appreciations of Draupadī, especially as depicted in the key moments of the *Mahābhārata* (289, 317, 368). Such familiar tales as the "traditional dice game" take on entirely new dimensions and fuller meanings.

Because he has listened so well, because he has been exposed to so many living sources, because he is familiar with so many different night-long dramas enacted in so many different village festivals, Hildebeitel and his work thus become an indispensable tool for those seeking really to understand the still dynamic and creative tension between the regional and classical traditions of India. *The Cult of Draupadī 1. Mythologies: from Gingee to Kurukṣetra* is unique; it offers a truly special window into the inner tensions and working dynamics of popular devotional Hinduism (*bhakti*). It is a work of true scholarship.

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NARAYAN, KIRIN. *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989. xl+285 pages. Bibliography, photographs, notes, appendices, index. Paper, n.p.; ISBN 0-8122-1269-x.

At the 1984 meeting of the American Anthropological Association I had the pleasure of seeing and hearing Kirin Narayan enact the character of Swamiji (Swami Prakashananda Saraswati, who died in 1988) describing himself as a topsy-turvy (agaram-bagaram) sadhu. This book now describes Swamiji, sanniyasi and storyteller extraordinary, as he held forth daily in his home in Nasik, Maharashtra, to a varied assembly of disciples, Indian and Western. The central issue of the book is how narrative is used to convey religious teachings that are also of relevance to the flow and predicament of these people's lives.

The stories are Swamiji's, but the book that frames them is Kirin Narayan's story about these and other tales. Indeed, the structure of the book approximates a master (and masterful) narrative that tells of Kirin the Indian child who learned of Swamiji from her family, and Kirin the American anthropologist who learned through him. So, too, members of her family make their appearances amidst a variety of barbers, businessmen, gurus, hypnotherapists, and many others. Highly reflexive, the text is not egoistical, for the weaving together of stories that in turn become stories about stories, makes the compelling qualities of narrative the issue. Here, narrative is not made an excuse for this anthropologist telling a tale about herself for her own sake—a style prominent in many ethnographies influenced by post-modernist literary theory. Narayan writes with understatement, compassion, grace, and (perhaps a thanks-offering is due too to Swamiji?) a wonderful clarity of style that bears out the text as an extended, entrancing tale of how stories are told and listened to.

The black-and-white photograph (taken by Narayan) that frames Swamiji on the book's cover is emblematic of the text. Swamiji, his roundish face wreathed in a kindly smile, *rudraksh* beads round his neck, sits on matting, his crossed legs thrust out before him. The lower leg has a chthonic cast, massive and hairy, ending in a large sole (foregrounded by the camera) made for leaving deep, lasting imprints in the

minds of his disciples. Topsy-turvy from head to toe, by turns benignly spiritual and earthily impish, Swamiji, a devotee of the Goddess, seems to turn on his own internal axis, searching to succor his disciples. So, too, the frame of the book (Kirin's narrative) turns on itself as, for example, when Swamiji talks to Kirin on how it is that people, not gods, make religions (228). There is no clear distinction here and elsewhere between an outer frame (Kirin's narrative) and an inner one (Swamiji's narratives). Instead, like a Möbius strip, one becomes the other, turning perspectives inside out.

The book is divided into three parts. The chapters of part one discuss the setting of research, ideas of narrative, basic concepts and cultural categories of Hindu tradition, and the contexts of listening (on the part of different people) to Swamiji. The chapters of part two take up stories that Narayan recorded, alternative versions of these stories, commentaries on them, and interpretations of the stories offered by different listeners. Each tale raises themes that are prominent in Indian culture, that thread through contemporary Indian society, and that are relevant to the living lives of the listeners. These discussions are determined by the stories that Narayan chose to reproduce in the book. Neither these stories nor their thematics are organized in terms of any overarching conceptual schema (indeed, this might subvert the construction of the book itself as narrative, and so too the role of Swamiji's narratives within this construction). This absence becomes especially problematic in part three, where Narayan makes explicit her conclusions as to why stories are such a common form of religious teaching.

Among these conclusions are the ideas that narrative is a prime means of organizing meaningful experience; that a story's lifelike properties allow its events to become believable; that religion could be defined as "a system of stories"; that stories are interchangeable with other forms of communication and practice (for example, ritual); and that "teachings transmitted orally do not encounter the problem of relevance, for they are made contemporaneous with every retelling . . . oral transmission unself-consciously accommodates change" (245). The last is well taken. The others are commonplace. The strength of the book is in its skilled and sophisticated construction of the anthropologist's storytelling, which often resonates with that of Swamiji. The good tale, the persuasive story (Swamiji's, Kirin's) wanders evocatively, capturing and forming the imagination (100) of listener and reader. Often this journey is itself the very point, this medium the substance of the message, a view that unites Swamiji's tales and Gregory Bateson's thinking (not mentioned in the book) on expressive media and information processing. The weakness of the book is in its minimal conceptualization outside of the story frame that dominates the text. How to synthesize the lability of storytelling with systematic analysis (or how to fruitfully play one off against the other) remains a major challenge for ethnography.

In 1990 the Society for Humanistic Anthropology gave this book the first Victor Turner Award for Ethnographic Writing. This was a fine choice, of a labor of love for a man whose labor was love.

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P.S. There is one misprint (77) whose wry humor is irresistible. The Aghori ascetics are not "negrophagous"—to my knowledge they have no dietary preferences in their choice of corpses.