

Tulasi Srinivas, *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder*

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The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder by Tulasi Srinivas is a captivating and theoretically intricate contribution to ethnographic studies on modern-day India. Srinivas uses the aesthetic sentiment (*rasa*) of wonder to interrogate the effects of neo-liberal modernity on Malleshwaram, Bangalore—a place she presents as a snapshot of large-scale transformations in urban India. Srinivas takes a delightful, yet realistic view of how modern change is inspired, integrated, and imbibed by the multi-generational Malleshwaram community. Using the language of suggestion, metaphor, and literary “adornment” (*alaṅkāra*), she brings the reader into the vibrant world of Hindu ritual, which mediates modernity and tradition.

The Cow in the Elevator is the product of Srinivas’s sixteen years of field study, most of which focuses on the ritual lives of two temples and their *pūjārīs* (Brahmin priests). It is within these ritual spaces that Srinivas explores how wonder is both the device and outcome of religious and social transformation.

Srinivas outlines three primary methodological and theoretical themes in the book. The first is *ethnographic positionality*, in which she advocates for involvement in the “messiness and unpredictability of individual lives” (16). This positionality tests the boundaries between subject and object to the extent that the researcher acknowledges her own transformation and objectification in the ethnographic process. Second, Srinivas theorizes about the *ritual creativity* of Mallechwaram’s religious landscape—a landscape and culture that adapts to modernity while also influencing the scope and trajectory of modern change (24). Third, she illustrates how *creative ethics* are used to recontextualize virtual and actual ritual spaces in Mallechwaram. Creative ethics, she says, are an “anthropological imagining of doing rather than philosophical thinking,” which offers a way for locals “to get beyond the tedium of habit, the ‘uncanny of everyday life’ (Das 2015), where a broader understanding of ‘new regimes of living’ inheres in the category of experience (Collier and Lakoff 2004)” (30–31).

The book explores the contours and content of wonder through five chapters and two interludes, which move from the material, geographical ritual spaces of Mallechwaram to the abstract, conceptual spaces in which transformation is deeply felt and embodied. In chapter 1, “Adventures in Modern Dwelling,” Srinivas introduces the paradox of wonder—how it is a generative force as well as that which resists modernity. This paradox, she argues, “is enabled by a philosophy that allows for expansion and inclusivity alongside control and containment” (57). Here, Srinivas outlines her methodology of grounded and ungrounded wonder. Grounded wonder refers to a theory of wonder that is grounded in her ethnographic research in Mallechwaram (38), while ungrounded wonder refers to the changing cultural and physical landscape of Bangalore.

In chapter 2, “Passionate Journeys: From Aesthetics to Ethics,” Srinivas moves more deeply into the theory of wonder and ethics. Here the aesthetic sentiment of wonder is used as a theoretical framework, allowing her to contest theories that view ritual as an ordering principle that seeks to make meaning out of chaos. Instead, Srinivas exhibits that a sense of wonder in ritual leads to what she calls “rupture-capture,” the disruption of mundane, ordinary life, and the re-enchantment of tradition in new, urbanized settings. She likens this wonderment to Rudolf Otto’s “numinous” as well as Kant’s “sublime,” yet her particular approach fuses together the sacred and mundane, arguing that in Mallechwaram, “the possibility of the extraordinary coalesces in the ordinary everyday” (73).

Spiritual and monetary economies mutually illuminate each other in chapter 3, “In God We Trust: Economics of Wonder and Philosophies of Debt,” as Srinivas explores “money as part of the everyday calculus of ritual life” (103). A focus on money helps to interrogate the meaning of everyday ethics, within which creative ethics emerge. Understanding money as materiality helps to understand how expressions and displays of wealth in temple settings are employed to show that the temple, community, and deity still retain power in a quickly modernizing Bangalore.

Chapter 4, “Technologies of Wonder,” discusses technological advancements and the new tech world of Hindu ritual. Srinivas explores varied aspects of technology, including the mechanistic, computerized world, as well as the virtual realm of social media and the internet. Chapter 5, “Timeless Imperatives, Obsolescence, and Salvage,” deals with time as cosmology in Mallechwaram. Srinivas looks at the conflicting times that modernity and ritual occupy and how work-time interferes with temple-time and

the ramifications of this for the devotee. She returns back to the Hindu cosmological construction of time as *yuga* and the eschatological understanding of modern times as the *kaliyuga* (the last of four epochs). These two cosmologies overlap in Malleshwaram, where Srinivas finds both the valorizing of a past golden era as well as an impetus to keep up with “the times.” Valorization of the past is seen in a reification of old temples, while attempts to keep up with changing times are found in “salvaged gods,” traditional deities who are repurposed and reimagined for the changing needs of a new generation.

Self-reflexivity, visual storytelling, and thick description are used adeptly to locate Srinivas as a particular kind of ethnographer—one who exists at the tense point between two realities: the religious culture of Malleshwaram and its globalizing tech culture and rising middle class. Srinivas is able to objectively recount her own situatedness as an ethnographer into the fabric of a compelling study that is equal parts field study, analysis, and narrative of wonderment in modern-day Bangalore. I highly recommend the *Cow in the Elevator* as a book that successfully pushes ethnographic boundaries while telling a rich and detailed account of religion and ritual in India.

REFERENCES

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