Drew Thomases, *Guest is God: Pilgrimage, Tourism, and Making Paradise in India*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 212 pages. Hardcover, $99.00. ISBN: 9780190883553.

Based on my experience, Pushkar is complicated. On one hand, it is an ancient Hindu pilgrimage site; in Hindu lore, it is the world's oldest, since creation is said to have begun there. On the other hand, in the past forty years, Pushkar has become an international tourist haven whose local economy revolves around their desires and spending patterns. Each identity is completely real and the two imperfectly coincide. So, my interest was piqued upon learning of Drew Thomases' dissertation research there. Ideally, an ethnographic site study provides a nuanced description of that place—including local agents, interests, and social currents—and then connects these particulars with broader concerns. Thomases fulfills both goals adeptly and with humility. The epilogue cautions that he "does not pretend to offer the final or definitive statement on Pushkar; rather this book about Pushkar is *my* book about Pushkar" (160). That is, the book reflects *his* experiences and especially those he chose to prioritize. Such experiences overwhelmingly center on "the people who call Pushkar 'home'" (163), particularly those working in the tourism-pilgrimage intersection, whom he calls the "producers" of the discourse regarding Pushkar's holiness. One might quibble that "consumers" clearly participate in this dynamic discourse. After all, the ultimate test of any "product"—whether an object, a service, or an idea—is how the target audience responds. Unfavorable reception quickly compels savvy producers to retool and reformulate.

This quibble aside, it seems that "locals" are Pushkar's most interesting group. Hindu pilgrims come in droves but largely perform the same few rituals. Foreign tourists too tend to trace predictable arcs. Having secured their "Pushkar passports" (the red string wristlets tied on after doing worship), they are free to eat banana/Nutella pancakes, drink their chais and "special" (cannabis-infused) milkshakes, browse the jewelry and clothing shops, and generally indulge their consumer desires in an economy centered around fulfilling these.

In contrast, locals find themselves continually renegotiating their identities in the face of rapid social change—an unusual phenomenon for religious sites, whose general conservatism usually retards such shifts. Many locals, perhaps 30–50 percent (3), are Parashar Brahmins holding hereditary rights to perform rituals for Pushkar's pilgrims. Such status would have traditionally conferred leadership and privilege but carries less weight in the new economy, in which Indian pilgrims still come in throngs. However, the foreign market is far more lucrative. Successfully navigating this new economy not only requires new skills, particularly English-language skills, but also a far greater entrepreneurial disposition.

Given this context, one of the text's recurring themes is responses to globalization, as this conservative community adapts to its changing social landscape. One such response described at length in chapter 3 is the newly minted occupation of "guide" as a "new form of priesthood" (31), who still engages in teaching and cultural translation but for a predominantly foreign clientele. Guides ply their trade using market-tested aphorisms from the "Phrase Factory" (18ff.), pithy sayings such as "Guest is God," "Five Fingers Not Alike," and "Same Same But Different." These phrases convey and promote particular images of hospitality and acceptance, non-essentialism, and tolerance for difference. Such discourse helps create a "tourism imaginary," which Thomases paraphrases as "assumptions about what a tourist destination *should be*" (98, italics original). Pushkar's particular "imaginary" projects and reinforces ideas appealing to foreigners, among them religious universalism and inclusion (such as "brothering," 39ff), India as a land in which mystical experiences abound, and a focus on "spirituality" (billed as a universal human quality) rather than any particular "religion."

Thomases rightly recognizes that these "imaginaries" have economic implications but stresses that such connections do not preclude genuine piety. He notes that "the people with whom I spoke actually meant the things they said" (160) and rightly observes that many Hindus see no need to disconnect the ideas of religion and money. Chapter 2 provides one memorable analysis of local piety, in which he accompanies friends on a cleaning tour around the sacred lake. He interprets this as a ritualized act, partly because the group follows ritual conventions—walking barefoot, and clockwise—but even more because they imbue this practice with symbolic meaning. In everyday life, trash collection is considered a low-status occupation, but these (high-status) participants perform this act by comparing it with the need to wash one's own body. Here, Thomases illustrates their genuine piety—in that they see the lake as a holy place requiring care and maintenance—as well as how such sentiments can accommodate new concerns, in this case, environmental ones. Other chapters connect with further wider themes—analyses of Hindu universalism (chapter 1), a history of the notion of "vibrations" (chapter 5), and theorizing on color and photographic images in the context of the Camel Fair (chapter 4)—that like Pushkar itself have different messages for different audiences.

Finally, Thomases writes with genuine affection for people whom he describes as friends and adopted family. He shows a keen eye for detail, as in describing a friend's slow pace as the result of a childhood polio infection (66), as well as a witty ear for phrases, such as "loudspeakers set to eleven" (178). He adeptly conveys the community's pervasive uncertainty as it adapts to social change, in which even "winners" can feel adrift and unsatisfied, as his friend Sandeep, who gave up the "donation life" to run a tea stall (40). Such uncertainties have a lengthy history, since the local charter myth describes Savitri as cursing the local brahmins always to be beggars and never to be satisfied (78). Yet despite such constricted and uncertain prospects, most Pushkar residents are reluctant to leave—not only because this would eat into scarce financial resources but even more because of their emotional ties to this "paradise" that they call "home."

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