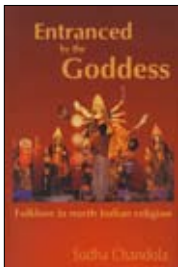


India



Sudha Chandola. *Entranced by the Goddess: Folklore in North Indian Religion*

Wymeswold: Heart of Albion Press, 2007. 205 pages, glossary, index, bibliography, b/w photographs. Paper, GBP £12.95; ISBN: 978-1-905646-08-1.

THE “BLURB” at the frontispiece of Sudha Chandola’s *Entranced by the Goddess* promises “direct insight” into the various goddess traditions of north India, and comments on the influence those traditions have had “among English-speaking modern pagans.” While the book does not deliver as promised, *Entranced by the Goddess* may be of some interest to the casual reader seeking an insider account of certain aspects of goddess worship in north India. The book is an emic report of the author’s memories and observations of family religious events, and as such constitutes a sort of anthropological artifact and may be worthy of study on those grounds. Chandola tells us several times that her brahmanical status gives her access to many rites and rituals that foreigners could not witness. Most of

what she describes, though, are public events, or even observances popular among non-brahmans, so perhaps her concern is for monolingual foreigners, few of whom conduct anthropological or religious studies field work in South Asia.

Chandola takes us through the ritual day for the goddess in chapter 2, “Goddess worship songs.” Several scholars have written on Krishna’s daily routine in his temples, and so this reviewer was quite eager to learn to what extent the goddess follows something similar. The descriptions Chandola provides give the reader a series of snapshots uncluttered by detail or deconstruction. The author simply records her impressions of her family’s activities surrounding various festivals, with little or no analysis or even any comparative remarks. Like most of the book, this section is anecdotal and so we do not know whether what she describes is what happens universally or only at some temples, among brahman or more widely, only among women or only among men, in mixed groups, and so on. Chandola has unfortunately missed the opportunity to make a useful contribution to the growing body of literature on temple rituals.

In the same chapter the author presents a number of the songs devotees sing to the goddess at various times of the day or on various occasions. These songs could have helped us understand some of the ways devotees think of and interact with their goddess. Is she mother? Loving daughter? Or even, as we find in some of the Krishna traditions, lover? Chandola’s translations of these songs will work well with an Indian or Indian heritage audience who will recognize the flora, fauna, and customs in these renderings. However, much of this will elude those outside the tradition, including scholars unfamiliar with South Asia at all.

The lack of footnotes and other citations is rather dismaying, and renders the book useless for academic purposes. The reader cannot ascertain whether the author is reporting what she heard from, for example, her grandfather, or read in a school textbook, or simply observed. The writing itself is rather choppy, and the reader struggles to discern an argumentative thread. For example, she writes “Phallic worship was popular in the Indus Valley culture” (24), an assertion most would question, yet Chandola provides us with no evidence to support her fascinating claim. And in her very next sentence she moves on to a new topic, that of animal sacrifice.

Chandola makes a number of technical errors in *Entranced by the Goddess*, many quite small in and of themselves, but collectively they leave an impression of carelessness that a good editor could have corrected. For example, Chandola refers to the *Rig Veda* as a “book,” something this originally oral literature did not become until relatively recently in history. Elsewhere she reports that the “*Bhagavad Gita* is also considered traditionally a part of” the *Mahābhārata*. No “consideration” is involved; this is not a matter of dispute. The only question is whether, and if so when, the *Gita* was interpolated into the body of the larger epic, or had been included since its earliest compilation.

The author’s own closeness to her roots seems to have led her to make numerous assumptions regarding her audience’s familiarity with the culture. For example, in the course of telling a story, she uses the word “mama” (73) with no explanation. The context alone will not tell the reader that this is not the familiar English

affectionate term for “mother,” but instead the Hindi (Bengali, and so on) term for “maternal uncle.” Two sentences later she writes, “Once addressed as uncle...” with no connection to the previously cited sentence, so that a reader who does not know any of the NIA languages cannot follow her train of thought to connect these two sentences.

Chandola includes several photos in her book. Setting aside the family photos, these show us people sitting in a trance, or temple deity images, or even temple buildings themselves. As some of the temples are in very remote locations, we might not otherwise have the chance to see them.

Entranced by the Goddess is a book that the lay reader may find interesting. It contains no academic jargon and the narrative flow is not interrupted by footnotes. The book, which appears to have been the author’s PhD dissertation, includes a glossary, an index, and a brief bibliography, all of which are useful. Sudha Chandola tells us in her introductory material that she had become fascinated with the tales she remembers hearing as a child, and the experiences relatives and family friends would share. Her book reads like a dream, with these vignettes described in no particular order. Some readers may find this treatment quite to their liking.

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