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LAMB, RAMDAS. *Rapt in the Name: The Ramnamis, Ramnam, and Untouchable Religion in Central India*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002, x + 237 pages. Paper US\$21.95, ISBN 0-7914-5386-3; Hardcover US\$57.50, ISBN 0-7914-5385-5.

The ex-Untouchables of India form about sixteen per cent of the Indian population. They are spread all over India. They are called by various names, such as "Harijans," "Exterior Castes," "Depressed Classes," "Outcastes," "Scheduled Castes," and "Dalits." They are not a homogeneous community and are divided into several sub-castes in the hierarchical caste system of the Brahmanic social order. So, among the Untouchables themselves there is superior and inferior ranking in terms of social status. Today, they are politically very active.

Lamb's study of the Ramnamis is concerned with the religious practices of the Untouchables of Chhattisgarh in Central India. Economically Chhattisgarh is one of the most backward states in India having nearly two-thirds of the Scheduled Castes and a large number of the tribals. This region of India was a part of the Kosala kingdom in the fourth century AD. Since that time it has been subsumed in various kingdoms. The Maratha conquest of Chhattisgarh around 1758 brought Brahmin priests to this area whose language and culture are different from the local population. The Maratha Brahmins began to Sanskritize the culture and people of this area. Their gods and their notions of purity-pollution were introduced among the people of this region.

The upper caste Hindus worship Ram as the incarnation (*avatar*) of Vishnu. The lower castes also have their own version of Ram devotion. The religious practice of the Harijans consists of reading and reciting the Ram story (*Ramkatha*) and the chanting of the name of Ram (Ramnam). It may look as if the Harijans have borrowed this worship pattern from the upper castes. But, Lamb suggests that the original Ram devotion is that of the non-Sanskritic (Harijan) people. It is the upper castes who have appropriated their Ram worship from the lower castes. This is not surprising because a few anthropologists have suggested that the Brahmins have appropriated many of indigenous cultures and Sanskritized them according to upper caste philosophy and ideology.

This suggestion of Lamb comes from the fact that the *Ramkatha* has been in existence as an oral tradition for the last twenty-five hundred years in South and Southeast Asia, influencing the religious, artistic, and literary history of cultures beyond the borders of India. Since the time of the earliest known elaboration of the Ram story attributed to the poet Valmiki, this epic tale has inspired over three hundred versions in at least twenty-five Asian languages. Its history and growth in many ways parallel the evolution and maturation of the

Hindu tradition itself. The wandering bards have continued to modify the tale to meet the changing needs and values of various cultures, time periods, and sectarian belief systems. We know from anthropological sources that storytellers have always had a central role in the religions and cultures of non-literate peoples. In India, the tradition of storytellers is ancient and may even predate the rise of the Aryan culture. The origin of *Ramkatha*, which could be from the non-Sanskritic tradition, may be confirmed by the fact that Ram is described as being dark in color, in contrast to the relatively light-skinned Aryans, and Ram is not mentioned in the earliest of the Vedic hymns.

In the legends and tales of Ram, the prince of Ayodhya gets brahmanized in the literary work of Valmiki Ramayana. While Valmiki's work presents Ram primarily as a human with divine qualities, the later works identify Ram with Brahman, the unqualified absolute. From the above facts, Lamb suggests that "The *Ramkatha* (Ram story) appears to have had its origin among the peoples of the northern and central regions of eastern India." He also comes to the conclusion that the origin of *Ramkatha* took place in "an area outside of strong brahmanical influence."

In studying Ram devotion among the Untouchables of Chhattisgarh, Lamb offers a highly complicated theoretical understanding of Hinduism itself. He is of the view that if we conceive of Hinduism solely in brahmanical terms and categories, that is, a religion bound in the Vedic tradition and the socio-religious stratification expressed in the *varnashrama-dharma* system, then we would have to say that the majority of Indians are, in fact, not Hindu. If, on the other hand, we think of Hinduism as the religion of India's masses, with its vastly differing customs, values, beliefs, and practices, then we must reject the brahmanical model as the norm. The author, therefore, suggests that the vast array of non-Vedic elements that has subsequently entered the upper caste Sanskrit Hinduism are indeed indigenous in origin. These elements were absorbed through Sanskritization and Brahmanization.

In order to prove this point, Lamb studies the Ram tradition in India, particularly among the Untouchables of Chhattisgarh. Here, the *Ramnamī Samaj* is the focus of his study.

The author is an Italian-turned-Hindu monk belonging to the Ramanandi order. He tries to comprehend India and Hinduism through his research. While his introduction raises a very complex theoretical issue in Hinduism, his subsequent chapters do not pursue this problem. Thus, his introductory chapter and the subsequent chapters are disconnected. He tries to understand Hinduism from below. But he fails to see the power dimension of the upper castes and the hegemonic role the Brahmin elites have played in defining the identity of the indigenous people of India. Since the Untouchables of India have been told that they are impure and very low in their social status, there was a thirst among the lower castes and Untouchables to raise their social status towards the upper castes. Here, the Untouchables have been imitating the culture of the Brahmins with the hope that they would receive respect. Though the author says that the Ramnamis (Untouchable devotees of Ram) in Chhattisgarh have never sought caste-Hindu validation, this is not convincing. Today, there is a powerful movement led by Kanshiram, the founder of the Bhaujan Samajwadi Party (BSP), who is himself a Harijan and is asking people to leave the Hindu social order and organize themselves to build a modern India on the basis of equality, fraternity, and social justice propounded by Dr. Ambedkar, the undisputed icon of the Untouchables of India.

Though the Ram cult was indigenous to the lower castes of India, today it has been so absorbed and monopolized by the upper castes that they even succeeded in launching the Ayodya movement to build a Ram temple by destroying the six-hundred-year-old Babri Masjid. In this context, could the Ram cult still be the exclusive religion of the Untouchables as the author subtitled the book? In spite of this, the author needs to be acknowledged and appreciated

for his effort to unravel the religious contribution of the Untouchables in India. This study can be seen as another proof of the appropriating and dominating aspect of Brahmanic Hinduism.

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GAENZSLE, MARTIN. *Ancestral Voices: Oral Ritual Texts and their Social Contexts among the Mewahang Rai of East Nepal*. Performances: Intercultural Studies on Ritual, Play and Theatre, vol. 4. Münster: LIT Verlag, 2002. xix + 338 pages. Figures, map, drawings, glossary, bibliography, index, b/w photographs. Paper €35.90; ISBN 3-8258-5891-X.

Ancestral Voices, with its reorientation of “ritual” toward more specific concepts, including textuality, indexicality, and competence, and its high standard of precision, makes a substantial contribution to the study not only of Himalayan peoples but also of oral literature anywhere. As befits a solid German *Habilitationsschrift*, this book is meticulously detailed, conducting a ponderously exhaustive examination of its precisely delineated topic, certain ritual texts of the Mewahang Rai, a tribal sub-group of perhaps 4000 people living in eastern Nepal. Gaenzsle has previously published a substantial study of Mewahang Rai social organization and mythology (GAENZSLE 1991); in this new work he concentrates on various forms of ritual speech used by them, situating oral text in its performative context. Gaenzsle’s key thesis, convincingly advanced for the material selected, is that Mewahang rituals consist basically of dialogical speech acts, and that these speech acts do not differ in any fundamental way from those used in ordinary life. An exploration of the ways in which ritual language differs from ordinary speech, how it is linked to ritual action, and of the power that it exercises in Mewahang social life form the core of this study. Gaenzsle seeks to balance his ethno-philological study of the relatively fixed qualities of the texts as language with the more dynamic levels of their performative, social, and cultural contexts. The second effort, admirably attempted, is not, however, entirely satisfactory. Despite careful description of their prosody, the “strange experience of a different dimension” that Gaenzsle reports upon first hearing a Mewahang ritual text performed is not shared with the reader. This could have been at least partially remedied, and the ethnographic value of the book significantly improved, had a CD-ROM of the chants been included—LORD (2000) and MARCH (2002) are good examples of a new standard of documentation to which works such as this one should conform. I am also disappointed that the study excludes the recitals of the *makpa* (shamans), but perhaps Gaenzsle’s next work will concentrate on these; even with these limitations, the work remains impressive in its attention to detail.

The main text is divided into two sections. Part I of the book analyzes the texts and situates them in the field of Mewahang social activity. After exploring local perspectives on the roles of ritual speech within the Mewahang cosmology in Chapter 1, Gaenzsle clarifies, in Chapter 2, issues of competence in ritual speech and the transmission of ritual knowledge. Chapter 3 seeks to develop a comprehensive classification of Mewahang ritual speech genres (exclusive of any *makpa* material), showing how they can be placed along a continuum of styles anchored at one end by ordinary language, all characterized by polite, dialogical speech. Differences are primarily matters of style, marked by features such as a pervasive parallelism at various levels ranging from canonical parallelism between verses to binomial parallelism within single nouns. A particularly interesting conclusion of this chapter is that “it is