

INDIA

RODRIGUES, HILLARY PETER. *Ritual Worship of the Great Goddess: The Liturgy of the Durgā Pūjā with Interpretations*. McGill Studies in the History of Religions. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003. xvi + 417 pages. Illustrations, glossary, bibliography, index. Hardcover US\$71.50; ISBN 0-7914-5399-5. Paper, US\$23.95; ISBN 0-7914-5400-2.

Durga Puja, the nine-night celebration of the Great Goddess in her form as Mahishamardini, the slayer of the buffalo demon, is without a doubt the most important Hindu ritual performed in West Bengal. It is celebrated domestically and publicly with much pomp and circumstance, in many ways resembling the Lenten Carnivals in the Roman Catholic world. Yet even though the annual festival has such an ostentatious presence in Bengali life, surprisingly little research has been done on the subject in English. But it is also a grand affair in the sacred city of Banaras, where a number of Bengali Brahman families have been living for many generations as a result of internal diasporas within India. Rodrigues' book focuses on the event as practiced in the latter, and is thus a useful contribution to understanding this densely layered ritual event.

His study consists of seven chapters and is divided into three parts: Context and Overview, Description, and Interpretations. After providing prefacing remarks in chapter one, the author introduces the uninitiated reader to the topic by defining his terms of reference (i.e., the general nature of the goddess and her ritual, identifying ritual actors, the composition of the audience, the use of liturgical manuals, etc.). Chapter three provides a general overview of the ritual, setting the stage for the second part of the study, which is the bulk of the book and largely descriptive in nature.

In this second section, Rodrigues focuses less on the social action occurring in the public sphere, such as the large pandals set up to display images of the Great Goddess slaying the buffalo demon, and more on the domestic rituals performed by one Brahman family and on the temple proceedings at a well-known Durga temple in the city. This allows him to focus on the liturgy recited daily during the nine nights and the tenth day. His description of the ritual actions that accompany the prayers as well as his sequential translation of the liturgy as they unfold over the period is the greatest contribution of the volume.

In addition to providing a detailed "thick description" of the ritual, the author devotes the third part of the study to interpreting what he thinks is really going on. Naturally, with any multivocalic event, more than one interpretation is viable, so Rodrigues explores various themes that emerge during the *puja* from an interdisciplinary perspective. He is most interested here in the nature of the *puja* and the goddess. However, in the final chapter he turns his attention to the function of the ritual, concluding that it is a symbolic time of cosmic rejuvenation on one hand and a multifaceted means of empowerment on the other. Empowerment, Rodrigues correctly points out, is apparent on many levels. It is personal, sovereign, communal, political, and economic simultaneously.

I found the concluding discussion the most interesting dimension of the book but the least developed. Unfortunately, because the author's main purpose is textual in nature, the important public role that the ritual plays as an ethnic emblem of Bengali identity is under theorized. I would also liked to have read more about the increasing secularization of the festival in recent years, which is certainly an important factor in the event being a vehicle for economic empowerment. These drawbacks aside, Rodrigues is to be congratulated for

providing us a detailed descriptive account of a religious festival that is so complex, even on the surface, that it defies easy consideration and hermeneutic reflection.

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