

**Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *Material Acts in Everyday Hindu Worlds***

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This book is an exploration of the visual aspects of Hinduism through a focus on material objects, their agency, their meanings, and their power in secular and sacred situations. Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger's study is based on long-term, extensive fieldwork in three different field sites in India: the central state of Chhattisgarh, Hyderabad in the Deccan Plateau, and Tirupati in the state of Andhra Pradesh. Throughout the book, she argues that material objects are not the passive tools of human agents, but that they "do things," and so the book is titled "*Material Acts*." The second part of the title, "*Everyday Hindu Worlds*," aptly captures her orientation to the lived religious experiences of the people: those who become possessed, those who are caretakers of statues and temples, and those who move among cement statues on the streets. Through her investigation, Flueckiger demonstrates the dynamic, oftentimes idiosyncratic nature of Hinduism, displaying, for example, the great diversity that exists in ritual acts and in deity identification and interpretation among people from different regions, of different castes, and of varied socio-economic classes. She analyzes the texts of songs and narratives, and she offers performative observations. It is Flueckiger's stated goal to "identify indigenous theories of material agency" (13), adding native interpretations to the widely accepted, homogenized understandings of Hinduism, which are often based on scholarly interpretations rather than on the understandings of ordinary people. In fact, she does accomplish this task, allowing her informants to inform us about the meanings of their religious material acts.

After a theoretical introduction, the book offers five chapters, each one focusing on a particular case study of religious material acts. The first chapter is an exploration of the auspicious ornaments of married women, which mark their marital identity and provide them with spiritual protection. In this chapter, Flueckiger analyzes both the power of certain ornaments—glass bangles, for example—as well as the power of certain materials, such as turmeric or gold. She asserts that the human gaze is not crucial for these material acts, though her argument is not entirely convincing. The *tali*, the wedding necklace, is worn under the clothes and not seen by others, yet it is seen by the wearer. Likewise, tattoos protect the married woman into the afterlife long after the physical body has been burned, yet they are placed on parts of the body that are the most visible in this life: arms, feet, face, lower calves.

Chapter 2 continues the topic of female adornment by focusing on what Flueckiger calls "material guise," ritual cross-dressing by devoted men fulfilling a vow to the goddess Gangamma during a one-week period every May. This chapter richly documents and describes the various preparations of dressing and possession in the pilgrimage

town of Tirupati. The *strī veśams* (men in female guise) don saris, fake breasts, braids, and ornaments, and Flueckiger includes photographs and interviews with both participants and onlookers, demonstrating the power of dress and adornment to transform men into the goddess. This chapter exhibits great ethnographic skills of participant observation; the author is present to record what is happening, where, and when. Flueckiger describes the origin story of the goddess Gangamma as *Adi Para Shakti*, the goddess's original form. This story is a wonderful contribution to written documents detailing origin myths, and I only wish that the narrative was attributed to a source: a person, a date, and a location where it was collected.

The next chapter focuses on women and their participation in essential aspects of Hindu worship—the *pūjā* sacred rituals, vow keeping, fasting, and feasting—underscoring nuanced distinctions between auspiciousness and inauspiciousness. In asking her female informants to name all eight versions of the goddess Lakshmi, Flueckiger never got the full inventory from any one person, but she was able to combine different lists into one to capture the goddess in a complete catalog (80–81). This is yet another great contribution to the written scholarly record, and I once again wish that a footnote would have cited the informants' names, giving them credit as the bearers of this knowledge.

Chapter 4 is perhaps the best one in this book. Flueckiger describes the conversion of street shrines in the city of Hyderabad over a long period of time, documenting changes in the architecture of the shrine and in the placement of paintings and sacred statues. These physical alterations can lead to fundamental shifts in the caretakers of the gods; in one instance the long-term lower-caste matriarch has been replaced by a Brahmin *pūjārī* priest. Flueckiger further details how a change in the physical structure can ultimately lead to a change in theology, in the interpretation of the one venerated in the shrine, resulting in the local folk goddesses being replaced by more standardized versions.

The last chapter is an exploration of ten-foot-tall painted cement statues of Ravana, the villain of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. These outdoor statues come in great variety (one wears a Western suit and tie), and they elicit a variety of interpretations of who Ravana was, how he represents the community, and what are the moral implications of his public figure. In this final chapter, Flueckiger is reflexive about her fieldwork, clarifying what her intentions are and how she goes about soliciting the information that she needs. Here, she once again models exemplary fieldwork methods. Throughout the book, we are aware that Flueckiger is fluent in Hindi and Telugu, that she has visited frequently (she grew up in India), that she has good rapport with her male and female informants, and that she has deep respect for them and their interpretations. I wish more of the excellent oral information was specifically attributed to people, bringing them into the historical record. One common shortcoming of a book on material culture is often the poor quality of the photographs, not the fault of the photographer (Flueckiger in this case), but of the publisher. All the photos in this book are black and white, even when the author is specifically describing color, luminosity, and palette. The quality of the paper is low, giving the black-and-white photos a yellowish tint, like old newsprint. Flueckiger's book—an admirable study of visual culture—has been mistreated by such low reproduction quality.

Flueckiger's work makes a genuine contribution to the study of material culture: to our understanding of architectures, and shrines, dress and adornment, sculptures and statues. She also demonstrates how much variation is found within Hinduism as a result of regional, caste, familial, and even individual readings of shared cultural norms. The

book is accessibly written and pleasurable to read. I only wish that the author's great attention to aesthetics was matched in the standards of production.

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