

Book Reviews

***People Trees: Worship of Trees in Northern India.* By David L. Haberman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. ISBN: 9780199929160. pp. 256, 34 illustrations. \$99.00 (hardcover), \$35.00 (paperback)**

The study of religion and the Indian natural and social environment in the academy has produced several key works in recent years. Perennial topics are Gandhian philosophy and the environment, Indian environmental ethics, nature in Indian philosophical traditions, and dharma, ecology, and sustainability. What much of this scholarship strives to achieve is to unmoor more philosophical work on Indian anthropocentric-biocentric dichotomies and subcontinental ideas of nature from the orthodoxy by implicating a more contemporary and practically focused outcome.

The epistemology and history of Haberman's work rests on a non-pejorative appreciation of the role of tree worship and animism in religion. Such a perspective is founded in the long-standing idea that religion evolved from the personification of nature of which reverence for and devotion towards trees is cardinal. By seeking to avoid what has previously been considered childish attribution of living qualities to the natural world and shameless popularising of religion by Western anthropologists and scholars of religion, Haberman posits that a serious investigation of the relationship between trees and religion may proffer insight into 'prominent features of the landscape of South Asian religion but also something generally about the cultural construction of nature, as well as religion overall' (p. 2). Moreover, this monograph is based more practically in a recent neglect of the theoretical concerns for what analysing tree worship can offer academic discourse within Indology and Indian environmentalism.

The author argues that the basis of much modern religious philosophy conceives of a 'dead' natural world as a result of the de-animisation of animistic worldviews. Thus begins his chapter 'Root Issues', a mainly-Western-but-also-Eastern philosophical-theological episode which sets up the justification for combining religion, spirituality, and concept tree as compatible bed fellows. "Who is a tree?" rather than "what is a tree?" is the sense with which the rest of the treatise is based. Trees are people, too.

The tree as reverential object is tendered both as worldwide and Indian phenomenon. The secular moves into the sacred, the profane to the holy, the unconsecrated to the sanctified in terms of what the tree as living being offers an eventual subcontinental take on our world-made-arboreal. An outline of differing denominational approaches to dualistic contradictions like name-form, form-formless, manifest-unmanifest, and essence-symbol leads into a diachronic précis of how the peopling of nature developed vis-à-vis tree worship in India. It is

here that Haberman's thesis based in his archival methodology and fieldwork needs to be scrutinised further. That 'people believe they can communicate directly with the gods by approaching a tree' (p. 52) and the other kalpa-vriksha (wish fulfilling trees) stories unveiled query the boundary between the apparent and the literal in Haberman's position.

Many of the tree story reminiscences indicative of village life, some of which are now urban, are difficult to take beyond the anecdotal. In many of the chosen examples, which in the mid and latter parts of the book focus specifically on pipal, neem, and banyan trees, the melding of sketches of experience within both a scriptural and belief driven background leaves the reader unsure of what position the author is taking. The theological sophistication of the grounds for common folk tree worship beyond a supernatural animism concentrated primarily on accruing fortune, blessings, good marriage, or a child is left somewhat unclear. It is here that the hard core Indian environmentalist and Indologist may be left unsatiated by Haberman's narrations.

Despite this key query, the personalised, ethnographic substance of the chronicling, the storied interpretation of the healing powers of trees in Ayurveda and the environment in general, the intertwining of well-written prose, and the many coloured images taken by the author make this work an attractive overall package. While trees are sentient vyaktis (people, individuals), this may not be as important as the passionate characters with whom Haberman interacts. Whether describing a pipal or a neem, a shrine or a temple, the worship of Hanuman or Sita-Ram, *People Trees* is at the same time about tree people. Without the tree, no shrine; without the shrine, no *seva*; without the *seva*, no interaction; without interaction, no peopling around the tree.

This is a positive book. It confirms that scripture can potentially be realisable in a practical sense. Haberman's use of real world phenomena, cf. the title of Chapter 7 'Arboreal Reflections', laced with generous amounts of pertinent reference to classical Hindu texts, has a performative outcome. We, the observers are standing at the trees with the actor, the devotee; cotton threads of white, yellow, and red surround these forms where an orange Hanuman deity is invoked daily by a saffron-clad *sadhu*. Incense burns, bells are rung, worshippers bow their heads to their God-made-tree snapshots of divinity. This 'who', these organic beings, are our friends. They give us shade, places where we can sit, ponder, and pray, a seemingly forgotten time-space-place among the rampant modernised industrialisation which engulfs contemporary India. Where the veneration of the people the author interviews appears a far cry from the tree huggers so well-known and depicted in modern Western environmental activism, *People Trees* depicts a more eloquent and less forceful plea. The reader well versed in Haberman's early work, especially his 1994 *Journey through the twelve forests*, will notice a distinct departure from a more pilgrimage and theologically focused rendition to a hyper personal, ethnographic, and phenomenological ordination of complex natural and religious complexities.

The developing corpus of a less structurally interpreted, overtly postmodern, and personally directed version of South Asian ecology is a distinct excursion from the more formal, more humanly distant, and less researcher-in-the-picture readings which appeared earlier. As a writer with decades of experience and in dissimilitude to the more mobilities driven character of his earlier monographs, Haberman's *People Trees* embodies this distinction; the generally more modern-structural versus the postmodern-humanised. In this latest work, the writer is present, methodologies involving real human beings, some of whom are perceivably the author's friends, are detailed, and reliable and replicable investigations are located in specific time-space.

One of the major differences between earlier detailed studies of and in South Asian religion and later but still less personally actioned enquiries is the acknowledgment and inclusion of the results of lessons learned of recent environmental activism in India. This is where political and social critiques by scholars such as Pankaj Jain, Anne Rademacher, and Whitney Sanford appear to make way for the well-tempered ethnographies of South Asian religious ecologies and their cultural landscapes such as Haberman's. The continual appearance of interest in Vaishnava environmentalism, e.g. the recent ecology issue of *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 2015(1), and the ethics of nature in Indian environmental history and law suggests that the coupling of religion with practical Indian ecological concerns and theoretical questions is alive and well. I believe an amalgam of environmental activism, distinctly human readings of nature-culture interaction, and an inculcation of Hindu textual representation is where one possible future of Indian and more generally South Asian religion and ecology studies lies. In spite of the several shortcomings I have outlined regarding Haberman's treatment of these matters, *People Trees* and its intellectual force offer as good a base as any upon which such future chartings can rest.

Joshua Nash
University of New England

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***Into the Twilight of Sanskrit Court Poetry. The Sena Salon of Bengal and Beyond.* By Jesse Ross Knutson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-520-28205-6. pp. x, 210. \$60.00 (hardcover).**

Jesse Knutson's book examines four major Sanskrit works from the court of Lakṣmaṇa Sena in Bengal at the end of the 12th century and into the 13th century—Śrīdharadāsa's anthology, the *Saduktikarṇāmṛta*, Dhoyī's *Pavanadūta*,