

Book Reviews

Material Acts in Everyday Hindu Worlds. Joyce B. Flueckiger. SUNY Series in Hindu Studies. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020. Pp. 206.

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Playing with J. L. Austin’s notion of “speech acts,” in which language does something besides just communicating information, Joyce Flueckiger tells us that material also *acts* and *creates* identity, theology, and transformation. With this fascinating book, the author aspires to, using Bruno Latour’s words, “make things talk” (13) and bring objects that play a central role in Indic spiritualities into the religious studies fold through an ethnographic-performative methodology. This approach was developed throughout many years of fieldwork across three geographic areas – Chhattisgarh, Hyderabad, and Tirupati. Such a potent combination of ethnographic study with performative analysis seeks to shed light on the unwritten “agency” of things, the capacity they have to act, to cause an effect, and to become vital materiality. This book boldly affirms that agency is not the monopoly of subjects: things can indeed enter into relationships with other objects and humans, called “assemblages” (a term borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s revolutionary work), and they can cause effects and relations that are unpredictable and unprovoked by conscious will or human intention.

Flueckiger takes the reader on an exhilarating journey into the quotidian religiosities of India in which objects become alive in the most unexpected ways. She flawlessly situates herself in India, in its myriad rural towns and at the margins of the ever-expanding megacities, evoking its smells and flavours, the crowds at festivals,

and the infinite pouring of story-tellings opened in a vast multiplicity of languages and worlds. The author's gaze moves from a carved rock at the foot of a sacred mountain whose origins are lost and has acquired a religiosity of its own, to all kinds of ornaments that give the body wearing them unpredictable qualities and powers; from shrines whose local goddesses transform their identities as the city grows in size, to cement statues of what "should" be regarded as a demon (the case of Ravana in the Ramayana's canonical story), and that, unexpectedly – through reversal with multifarious political consequences – become the object of reverence among Chhattisgarhis and Dalits.

Flueckiger aims to elicit the ways in which "Indian cultures are replete with examples of materials that are assumed to cause things to happen or to prevent them from happening," all of which gestures toward "an indigenous theory of the agency of materiality" (5). Although Flueckiger does not provide a final definition, she offers us many examples of what such a theory may look like. She takes her case studies from ordinary daily lives which manifest surprising ways in which materials display some sort of agency that seems unique to these Hindu worlds. Even though material religion has become a field of its own in the last decade, however minor, it nonetheless has been overlooked by most scholars of Hinduism and Indian religions.

In this complex terrain, Flueckiger shows how objects have their own agency beyond the human intention that shaped them in the first place. These materialities are strongly linked to social everyday life and Hindu practice. Western scholars have often privileged the study of texts in India to the detriment of everyday materialities. In recent years, there has been a slow but steady shift from this textual and discursive approach to a more embodied and material one, but as Flueckiger points out, this corrective has been

too anthropocentric, focused more on what materialities reflect of the humans who use them than on the materials themselves. Instead, Flueckiger pushes us to look at the materials for what they *do* or cause people to do, and not only for what they mean to people. Even though after Diana Eck's *Darshan* visual culture studies have turned to the image of deities and their gaze as having their own agentic materiality, Flueckiger has chosen to turn instead to the often neglected presence of the materials, their mere material existence, rather than their visuality.

This book reads like a folklorist detective novel on the hidden life of things and is also generous on theories and methodologies of material religion without ever losing focus on the main "ethnographic passion." The conversations she has with other people become the kernel of the book's structure: they are the primary sources, the lived textuality with which Flueckiger has produced her fantastic scholarship. How religion on the ground is currently lived often disorients scholars and confuses outsiders. Flueckiger makes an art out of this disorientation while participating herself in the worlds she tries to understand, dissolving the old insider/outsider divide. Gods and goddesses live among people, they visit them in dreams, and sometimes they possess their worshippers. A married man wearing a sari during a local festivity may be transformed by the power of that sari into a goddess. We now know after Judith Butler that gender is performative, but what happens when we consider the sari itself as performative? By interrogating performativity in this way, Flueckiger tries to make sense of things amidst these Indic religious worlds looking at the materials themselves, the things that hold those worlds in place (the saris, the statues, the shrines).

The all-pervasive and unwritten Hindu philosophy responsible for this indigenous theory of things interpenetrates

every daily activity and every body which either contains the divine or expresses it. To exist in this framework is to worship or to be worshipped. Every little thing may reveal the ultimate reality, and hence, it is to be ornate, to be made beautiful. The ornaments are called *alankara*, which is a Sanskrit word for poetry, or, more precisely, for what poetry *does*. Beauty is to be cultivated through rituals, festivals, collective practices; most importantly, via objects, guises, and all kinds of ornamentations (bangles, bracelets, necklaces, tattoos, rings), which are meant to not only beautify the body but to protect it against the evil eye. These materialities somehow contain an invisible spiritual power, the *shakti* that was infused in them when they were crafted, or alternatively, their substance may intrinsically possess power such as the gold of jewelry that is thought to have healing properties. In such a world, each material act is the act of the divine's power itself, however, this power is understood in every occasion. Religion here is performative; it enacts the world through the repetition of festivities and the daily rituals of adorning one's body or the stone-body of a god/dess, but it is also political, constantly negotiating the tenuous boundaries between the city and the village, caste and indigenous identities, folk spirituality and canonical religions.

The purpose of this book is thus “to bring materiality to the center of our understanding of everyday Hindu worlds” (161). To do religious studies in the way that Flueckiger does here implies challenging our common understanding of religion and reorienting it, from something that some humans do or believe in toward something that happens and is done within a network of multiple relationships that includes non-human actors. By focusing on everyday materiality as agentive, our theories and methods of religion are necessarily expanded and complicated. This book paves the way for a new perspective into South Asian studies and Indic

religions and it will be of great value for religious studies scholars who are willing to enrich their views and methodologies by decentering the human and giving materiality its relevance in the lived experience of religion.