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Book Review

GEAVES, Ron. 2007. *Saivism in the Diaspora: Contemporary Forms of Skanda Worship*. London: Equinox. viii + 312 pp. ISBN 978-1-84553-234-5 (hbk). £60.00.

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Saivism in the Diaspora: Contemporary Forms of Skanda Worship by Ron Geaves is incisive, highly informative, methodologically challenging and written in a lively and accessible style. It will surely become required reading for all scholars and students of religion interested in South Asian communities in the UK. Its publication highlights considerable gaps in the study of Hindu traditions established in Britain. First, as the author observes, very little has been published on Saivite Hindu traditions in the South Asian diaspora; recent academic interest has focused on the Vaisnavism of the Gujarati population and on the Hindu-based spirituality transplanted by Indian gurus among western converts. *Saivism in the Diaspora* goes some way to filling that void by insightful analysis of the transmission to Britain of the "cult" of Skanda (also known as Murugan, Kartikkeya and Subramaniyam). Secondly, it helps to redress the academic bias towards the study of North Indian forms of Hinduism by a focus on the worship of Murugan in South India and Sri Lanka. Thirdly, it addresses the fact that most studies of Hinduism in diaspora tend to focus on the dharmic or transcendental dimensions of religion, and that there is a severe under-representation in academic scholarship of the activities and beliefs of vernacular forms of religion. Geaves refers frequently to Roger Ballard's classification of the manifestations of Punjabi religion as panthic, kismetic, dharmic and qaumic, and following Ballard, sees himself as providing a study of the kismetic or pragmatic dimension of Indian "folk traditions." He argues that these "folk traditions" display a focus on the pragmatic motivation for the worship of deities associated with healing and exorcism. Thus *Saivism in the Diaspora* affirms the limitations of textual constructions, and returns us to the ideals of an anthropology focused on living religions.

Ron Geaves is particularly skilled in making sense of complex research material from a variety of sources, regions and countries. Fascinated by religious boundaries, he encourages his readers to look more carefully at the role of migration in transforming the religious landscape of the world, arguing that minority religions that are created in a new locality through migration processes must always be viewed as part of a global network of communications. He also reveals a robust determination to tackle important issues, and impatience with scholarship for its own sake. Explaining the lack of diacritics in his work, he states: "The following research is not Indology and I would not be able to write such a text. I am not grounded in Indian languages and the academic hermeneutics of eastern sacred texts... My Hinduism was learned on the streets of Varanasi, the ashrams of Haridwar and at the feet of various *Swamis* and mahatmas." Yet Geaves also claims that his is not an insider text. He presents the truth journeys of the academic researcher and the religious devotee as separate, and stresses that one of his aims is to clarify important theoretical concepts such as Sanskritization

and the relationship between the "little tradition" and the "great tradition" in the context of changing beliefs and practices in the Hindu diaspora.

Geaves's research is perhaps more narrowly circumscribed than his title implies. At its heart is the arrival and foundation of two British forms of Saivism: the worship of Baba Balaknath brought by immigrants from the Punjab in the 1960s and 1970s and the worship of Murugan or Subramaniyam brought by Tamil-speaking populations from Sri Lanka in the 1980s. The book is divided into 12 chapters which document the author's journeys and pilgrimages between Britain and India, and North and South India. Geaves's main tool is extensive fieldwork, which, unlike that of the classical anthropologists, is often carried out in short visits and involves travel. His firsthand experience of the major Murugan pilgrimage sites in India enables him to contextualize, interpret and translate the data he gathers together in diasporic communities in the UK.

The introduction sets out the aims and scope of the study. Chapter 2 places Skanda worship in the context of Saivite and devi worship. A constant theme of the book is that borders between religions are creative and spontaneous, but that even these fluid spaces have their charismatic guardians, guardians who patrol their domains. Geaves interprets Siva as the deity of borders, a deity who is full of paradoxes and irreconcilable characteristics. He belongs, along with his family, predominantly in the world of the vernacular. Skanda, also a "border country" deity *par excellence*, is uniquely Siva's son, created from his third eye and emerging as the celibate yogic renunciate. Chapter 3 introduces readers to Murugan, the Tamil god, the counterpart of Skanda in South India and Sri Lanka. It explores the historic development of Murugan in South India, and contrasts Tamil Nadu forms with Sri Lankan or Tamil Neelam forms of Murugan worship. Chapter 4 introduces the Indian context for the worship of Baba Balaknath. It begins with a report on the acute sensitivity of Tamil scholars to the suggestion that a contemporary manifestation of Skanda in North India exists. Geaves notes, however, that the image of Baba Balaknath as a child yogi seated upon a peacock and wearing a pearl necklace is almost identical to traditional iconography of Murugan. He provides fascinating detail about Baba Balaknath: his miraculous arrival on the mountain top by power of flight; his association with Siddhas; his identification with yogis; and his rivalry with Gorakhnath. Chapter 5 provides an overview of the development of the Hindu diaspora in Britain with an emphasis on the establishment of Saivism. Geaves explains that it was not until the 1980s that the first Baba Balaknath temples appeared, although house groups had been meeting since the late 1960s. He discusses the new Punjabi Hindu temples now being built, which have abandoned the old "ecumenical" style, and are dedicated to the goddesses of the Punjab. Such vernacular traditions "offer an immediacy that assertively contrasts with British secularism and the institutional forms of life developed in the 1960s." Chapter 6 focuses on the various traditions of Baba Balaknath in Britain. It examines the key differences between three Balaknath temples in Britain, and assesses the role of vernacular religion within the "Hindu" and "Sikh" diasporas. Chapters 7 and 8 explore the significance of pilgrimage to the devotees of Baba Balaknath, focusing in depth upon place and the way in which it constructs and affirms regional identity. Chapter 9 explores the migration of Murugan from the Tamil population of Sri Lanka. Interestingly, Geaves states that it is the traditionally educated Agamic specialist, familiar with the complex ritual life of Saiva Siddhanta, that has been persuaded to leave Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu, rather than the non-Agamic village *poosari*, authorized only by his ability to be possessed by the god. Yet, despite the influence of Agamic ritual specialists, institutional male authority and the desire to replicate the orthodox ritual life of Saiva Siddhanta, both Sri Lankan and Tamil Nadu Murugan worship maintain "archaic features." Geaves's research reveals that the old customs of *kavadi*, possession and mutilation (for example, body piercing and even hook-swinging), are alive and well in Britain. In chapter 10 Geaves turns to the Community of the Many Names of God, Skanda

Vale, which he visited before the death of Sri Guru Subramaniyam. This chapter raises particularly pertinent questions about methodology and hermeneutics. Geaves traces the origins of this apparently syncretic and ambiguously eclectic community to the raw *bhakti* of Tamil devotion, and affirms its fidelity to the Saiva Siddhanta tradition. However, he accepts that few, if any, of the monks would be aware of this. He comments that most of the western monks have not visited India and that they are not knowledgeable about Hinduism. They were unable to contextualize or identify the disciplines and practices which formed part of their daily lives. Geaves's own identification of their relationship with the *murtis* as originating in Saiva Siddhanta went unrecognized by them all. Geaves stresses the crucial importance of Subramaniyam and the *vel* (or lance) in Skanda Vale. While this may be the case for the many Tamil and even Gujarati visitors and pilgrims, this was not so clear in my conversations with many of the western followers. On each occasion it was the Mother who seemed dominant. Geaves is aware, however, that the more formal, masculine worship of Subramaniyam at Skanda Vale has been softened by the playful, passionate intimacy with the great energy that is Kali. Moreover, while Geaves rightly interprets the environment – the temple elephant, the herds of deer, the peacocks and the other animals – as an attempt to recreate the pastoral idyll associated with Murugan, I found that the brothers and nuns also accept St Francis as an inspirational role model. This suggests to me that the emphasis on the broader migration processes can lead on occasion to a muting of the views of the practitioners and devotees themselves. The incorporation of a more reflexive dimension could problematize the gap between the encompassing knowledge of the ethnographer and the beliefs and practices of the devotees.

Geaves in his final chapter revisits the notion of Sanskritization and finds in the concept of exchange activity a more fruitful tool to examine the emergence of *bhakti* movements, and vernacular forms of religion which universalize powerful regional deities. He observes rightly that, while the outsider focuses on the shifting boundaries between majority and minority communities, there are internal boundaries that are no less significant in identity formation. He concludes that the Saivite diasporas reveal the increasing strength of the apotropaic or pragmatic dimensions of religion and that this has repercussions for those who wish to understand religion and for education and health professionals who interact with South Asian communities.

Ron Geaves is the author of several books on Islam*: Islam and the West Post 9/11* (2004) and *Aspects of Islam* (2005). This study of Skanda worship confirms him to be one of the UK's most versatile and energetic scholars writing in the area of religious studies. Many of its themes echo those of Geaves's previous writings: his suspicion of the world religions model dominating religious studies education in the UK; his preference for ethnographical rather than textual constructions of religion; his insistence on the competitive diversity within particular "cults" and "traditions" as well as on the interweaving of local traditions, Hindu vernacular religion and Sikh popular traditions. This book challenges the increasingly dominant Vaishnava exegesis of "Hinduism" in Britain today, and points to the importance of apotropaic and kismetic aspects of Hindu and Sikh practice; rather than diminishing, they are actually alive and flourishing in the UK. Thus *Saivism in the Diaspora: Contemporary Forms of Skanda Worship* not only explores contemporary manifestations of the worship of Siva, but offers confirmation that ethnography across boundaries remains essential if vernacular religion with its apotropaic dimension of religion is to be understood.