
BOOK REVIEW

Halperin, Ehud. 2020. *The Many Faces of a Himalayan Goddess: Hadimba, Her Devotees, and Religion in Rapid Change*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. iv + 270 pp. ISBN 9780190913588 (hbk). £79.

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Keywords: religious studies; South Asia; Himalayas; anthropology; ritual fieldwork; religion, India.

The hard-to-access region of the Indian Himalayas has been a fertile zone for multitudes of distinct traditions and ritual practices. This book, which is a significant revision of Ehud Halperin's 2012 doctoral thesis submitted to Columbia University titled "Hadimba Becoming Herself: A Himalayan Goddess in Change", gives a clear look into such traditions by showcasing "lived village Hinduism" (p. 4), that is, how goddess Hadimba's devotees relate to her and how participation in ritual practices takes place. Rather than utilizing just the Turnerian imagination of "communitas" (V. Turner and E. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), the book adds another layer where ritual worship of Hadimba brings forth an assemblage of changing positions of power, tradition and belief. Instead of weaving a story devoid of contradictions, the book delves into the complexities of narratives as Hadimba has no systematic theology or textual history. The West Indian Himalayan region of Himachal is represented as "a rural area" (p. iv) which is perhaps an inaccurate generalization given that the region is India's second-largest apple producer after Jammu and Kashmir, it has the highest cricket ground in the world, its Dusshera festival of Kullu has an international status, and the region has vibrant tourism.

Chapter 1 begins with a description of the changing landscape of Himachal, a fascinating narrative of the agency of local deities and political engagement, and many, often contradictory narratives about Hadimba. Chapter 2 foregrounds ritual action through the goddess's embodiment in her palanquin, which is carried by devotees, and her oracular possession, in which she interacts with her devotees and other local deities. The multifaceted and ever-evolving local web of associations regarding Hadimba's social function and persona are examined in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 investigates the "Mahabharatization" of Hadimba through tourism and colonial forms of knowledge where local and larger ideas of Hindu imagination intersect. The debates over animal sacrifice in Chapter 5 become even more contentious as they echo the conflicts between the centre and the margin, and modernity and tradition. Chapter 6 examines ecology and religion and how the agentic divine force of Hadimba is made sense of through her command over the weather in the region. Weather disturbances are seen as the wrath of Hadimba over the misconduct of

villagers. It is an interplay between the goddess and global ecology. Cash-crop economy and tourism have resulted in the relative expansion of the villages but they also face uncertainties due to climate change.

The author argues that the transactional relationship between Hadimba and her devotees is that of a *dividual* rather than an individual, namely, “a porous being that is in constant exchange with other beings around it” (p. 57). However, a pioneering Indian psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar (S. Kakar, “Psychoanalysis, culture and the cultural unconscious” in M. Kumar et al. (eds.), *Psychoanalysis from the Indian Terroir: Emerging Themes in Culture, Family, and Childhood*, London: Lexington Books, 2017) mentions that “dividual” nature is not only limited to the traditional regions but is even found in the urbanized worlds. Through in-depth ethnographic and textual materials, there are elucidations of myths, stories, dramatic festivals, and rituals, along with descriptions of everyday living in the Kullu valley. A while back, ethnographic writing employed a variety of linguistic expressions to strategically distance the ethnographer from the people about whom they wrote to maintain and inform the writing of scientific objectivity. Consequentially, a lot of writing was robbed of the ethnographer’s feelings, hunches and embodied experiences which play a vital role in ethnographic immersion, understanding, and the writing process. The current zeitgeist has resulted in a metamorphosis of ethnographic inquiry where the inclusion of the ethnographer in the writing is accepted and sought as it equips the reader to discern the roots from which a social science scholarship emerged.

The Many Faces of a Himalayan Goddess succeeds in this quest because Ehud Halperin is honest about his academic and personal involvement, reflecting what ethnography as a method is about. The author writes regarding the sacrifice, that he was “so emotionally invested” (p. 1) that he dreamt about it in the night. The ethnographers of the region from where Halperin’s book emerged usually fail to accommodate the co-existence of vegetarian and non-vegetarian practices regarding sacrifices, a theme that is aptly described in the book. Along with this, he brings forth an understanding of the goddess Hadimba, her ritual practices, and her story. Hadimba is not only a *being*, as acknowledged by the devotees and the author, but a “way of being” (p. 243, author’s emphasis) in their life as she paves a way for interpretations, everyday living, and in their being-in-the-world. Phenomenologically, the book demonstrates the “transitional space”, to take Donald Winnicott’s phrase (D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, London: Tavistock, 1971), that is, how self and other (here devotees and Hadimba) are neither one nor two, yet in some way or another together make up an interpenetrating field.

The region, devotees’ relation with the deity, and their ritual practices are creatively and constantly re-created and contested through invading royal forces, colonial shadows, tourism, capitalism, and ecological change. The book portrays how Hadimba has provided ritual, ideological and discursive areas to her devotees in which they practise, debate, give meaning to, and sometimes resist the changing realities, in the process of which, Hadimba herself has been transformed. The book reinforces much-needed ethnographic scholarship on underexplored practices and traditions of the gods and goddesses of the Central and Western Indian Himalayas. The book takes an interdisciplinary path and examines significant themes for scholars and students interested in anthropology, ethnography of worship practices, religious studies, and South Asian and Himalayan area studies.