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Book Review

David L. Haberman, *Loving Stones: Making the Impossible Possible in the Worship of Mount Govardhan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 328 pp., $35.00 (pbk), ISBN: 978190086725.

What does it mean to see a river, a tree, or a mountain as divine? Perhaps no scholar of Hinduism has explored this question as thoroughly as David Haberman. His previous books have focused on a sacred river (*River of Love in an Age of Pollution,* 2006) and on sacred trees (*People Trees,* 2013). His latest book, *Loving Stones,* focuses on the worship of Mount Govardhan, a sacred hill in northern India associated with the life of Krishna. Haberman vividly brings to life the relationship that many devotees have with Mount Govardhan—an intimately personal, loving relationship in which the physical mountain is seen not merely as a symbol or abode of Krishna but as Krishna himself. Haberman's goal is not simply to document the worship of Mount Govardhan but to render it meaningful to readers who might otherwise find it 'impossible' (to quote the subtitle) to imagine bathing, dressing, or conversing with stones.

Chapter 1 offers an overview of the history, geography, and mythology of Mount Govardhan and the surrounding landscape of Braj, the mythical land of Krishna's youth. It also introduces the Puṣṭi Mārg and Gaudīya Vaiṣṇavism, the two Hindu traditions on which Haberman's study is primarily based. Chapter 2 discusses anthropological method. Haberman identifies his primary audience as Americans for whom stone worship represents a case of 'radical difference' (p. 45). He recommends a 'playful' approach to the study of cultural difference, which involves surrendering ourselves to 'the potentially enlightening disorientation' (p. 60) that comes from recognizing that our own sense of reality is socially constructed and that 'other ways of seeing and being are just as valid (or invalid) as our own' (p. 63).

Chapter 3 includes a brief consideration of sacred mountains around the world and a detailed consideration of the theology behind the worship of Mount Govardhan. Chapter 4 documents the practice of *parikrama,* or circumambulation of the sacred hill. The chapter also describes the public worship of Mount Govardhan stones at temples and shrines along this circuit. Chapter 5 then steps back to consider the history of 'idolatry' as an interpretive category. Haberman begins with Judeo-Christian sources but goes on to show how critiques of idolatry also influenced the thinking of scientists, philosophers, and early scholars of anthropology and comparative religion, as well as colonial-era Hindu reformers. Haberman also discusses Eliade's idea of 'symbolic representation' (p. 182), which he finds lacking; he suggests that in traditions such as Hinduism, the language of 'embodiment' is more appropriate.

Chapter 6 focuses on the private worship of Govardhan stones in home shrines. Haberman coins the phrase 'intentional anthropomorphism' to refer to the conscious

attribution of human characteristics to these stones for the sake of developing a devotional bond. The practice involves decorating a stone with eyes, clothing, and adornments—here the color photographs in the book are especially welcome—and treating the stone as Krishna himself. Haberman surveys historical and contemporary critiques of anthropomorphism, and he argues that anthropomorphism is not necessarily anthropocentric.

Chapter 7 asks: 'Just what has been lost in the moves of modernity? What kind of stones might be useful for paving the road to a return to vibrant enchantment?' (p. 227). Haberman suggests that reverence towards specific aspects of nature can sometimes lead to 'a more universal ethic of wider environmental care' (p. 241), and he provides examples of environmental activism among contemporary devotees of Mount Govardhan. As one informant remarks: 'The central point of the Govardhan story is the realization of divine presence in all of nature' (p. 242).

Loving Stones is a thought-provoking and rewarding book. Haberman combines the depth of a specialist with the breadth of a humanist, illuminating his case study with theoretical reflections from religious studies, anthropology, art history, environmental studies, social psychology, and cognitive science. Perhaps the only major shortcoming is the historical survey in chapter 5, which is potentially misleading in its selectivity. Haberman downplays the rejection of image-worship by the *sant*s, devoting only one sentence to this influential counter-current of Hindu thought: 'the fifteenth-century Hindu Sant poet Kabir ridiculed the temple worship of divine forms, but did not go so far as to regard it as evil' (p. 179). Perhaps not, but Kabīr's view is clear: 'It is but an image of stone which they worship as "Creator"! / Those who put their trust in it were drowned in a black torrent' (Vaudeville 1993: 205). Nor was Kabīr a lone voice; the words attributed to Nāmdev's guru are typical of the *sant*s: 'A stone image is regarded as God, but the true God is wholly different' (Bhandarkar 1913: 90). Even in Haberman's treatment of Euro-American sources, there is room for a wider range of voices. For example, he argues that 'Calvin's theology greatly undermines the cogency of the senses in cultivating a relationship with the divine' (p. 165). But is this true even for all Calvinists? Consider Jonathan Edwards's account of his religious awakening: 'The appearance of every thing was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast or appearance of divine glory, in almost every thing ... in the sun, and moon, and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature' (Simonson 1970: 31). Critiques of idolatry do not necessarily entail disenchantment of the natural world.

Readers are asked to approach the worship of Mount Govardhan with a sense of playfulness, openness, and vulnerability; in return they are promised an 'expanded sense of human possibilities' (p. 6). The book delivers on its promise, and this is high praise. And yet, one cannot help but wonder: in the practice of intentional anthropomorphism, is there not a missed opportunity? Is it not possible to cultivate a deep and intimate love for a stone *as a stone,* in all its stoniness, its suchness, its haecceity? Might we even conceive of a mode of worship that relied not on anthropomorphizing stones, but on lithomorphizing ourselves?

Haberman's book is a pleasure to read: his prose is alive with curiosity and wonder. *Loving Stones* is also accessibly written, and either the entire work or individual chapters could be suitable for undergraduate and graduate teaching. The book can be recommended not only to scholars of Hinduism but to all scholars with interests in religion and environment, as well as to anyone who has never spoken to a stone but who wishes to experience a radically different way of seeing the world.

References

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