

David L. Haberman, *River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of Northern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 277 pp., \$26.95 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0-520-24790-1. Review doi:10.1558/jsrnc.v2i4.530.

In his inimitable style—a mixture of primary text knowledge and fieldwork that feels almost like a vacation, resulting in an easy familiarity and affection—David Haberman has again written a great book. In this study of the river Yamuna he continues what he set out to do in his book *The Twelve Forests* (1994): he focuses on a particular religious location and freely mixes sectarian theology, features of the natural landscape, and voices of pilgrims and priests. But in contradistinction to his earlier work, this book openly shows his alarm. The details are alternatively thrilling and nauseating. Yet the overall impression is one of continuing delight and balanced hope.

The river Yamuna is presented as a goddess flowing with liquid love. Her course is traced from icy origins in the dramatic mountain landscape of the North, and followed all the way down to Allahabad where she merges with her parallel, the Ganges. River mythology, sacred geography, and today's physical features of flora and fauna are intertwined in such a lively and enticing way that one could easily get carried away, literally and figuratively, along with this dashing river. At the same time, when one is familiar with the traditional narrative of the young goddess's icy origins and how her fierce love for Krishna makes her hasten forward into the plains, one senses the advance of doom. In Hindu mythology, Yamuna is portrayed as an eager maiden rushing forward to meet her lover Krishna at Brindavan. But while she eagerly runs towards the plains in order to join her beloved, she gets dammed, depleted, and polluted with both industrial and human waste in such a way that the river that finally reaches the Braj area is sickeningly fouled, tamed, and discoloured.

In some critical reflections on the emerging academic field of Religion and Ecology, Hinduism has been portrayed as unfit for religion-based activism as a result of underlying ideas on the delusive appearance of all material reality (*maya*). Haberman contests this view as an unfortunate distortion inherited from scholarly literature produced during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which a relatively minor part of the tradition, Sankara's Advaita Vedanta, came to represent the entire tradition. He shows how in Bhagavata theology (the kind most worshippers of the Yamuna River are steeped in) there is no devaluing of the world of nature but instead a world-affirming attitude in which the world (*jagat*) is experienced as fully divine. The river Yamuna, in this view, is the liquid form of the highest reality, and part of a living sacred geography that connects all India.

Haberman's introduction into the general academic field of Religion and Nature in Chapter 1 is neither particularly original nor extensive, but may be necessary for a wider audience. The merit of the book is to be found in his attempts to bridge fluidly the divine and environmental realities. Scattered throughout the text, he offers insights into sophisticated Bhagavata theology and passages from devotional hymns to the Yamuna. Both convey the poetic mood that forms the heart of this study. Today's river activism is thus presented as *seva*, loving service to a Mother of Life (Chapter 2) who is slowly turning into a River of Death (Chapter 3). It is through river mythology, river poetry, and river rituals that both pilgrims and residents are made aware of their duty to save their river from further pollution. Readers are invariably shocked by the contrast between traditional river poetry and today's state of things, or between Haberman's personal accounts of the river in the early 1980s when he used to swim in

it—a pleasure he sternly has to deny his young son accompanying him now—and the present situation in which both official and unofficial statistics about the water quality are outright alarming.

The love affair between Krishna and Yamuna, referred to above, is seriously altered since many Krishna devotees feel that they should no longer bathe in the polluted waters or drink them as part of their morning ablutions. In the local temples, where the images of Krishna used to be sprinkled with fresh Yamuna water every day, thus ritually continuing the love affair between statuary Krishna and liquid Yamuna, priests today use bottled water. Instead of turning away from a helpless situation far beyond their power, devotees are shown to be inspired into effective action, more or less in the Gandhian tradition of *karmayoga*. In the course of the chapter on river activism (Chapter 5, 'Signs of Hope'), various names and their initiatives are presented, from neatly dressed schoolgirls carrying a slogan to dignitaries like Sunderlal Bahuguna. Some collaborations have achieved significant legal victories concerning industrial waste, whereas others have organized clean-ups and spread regulations on river care. That the issue of a questionable symbiosis of environmental activism and Hindu nationalism is not addressed here may be part of the enchantment this book creates, yet the informed and critical reader rightly wonders about the pitfalls of religion-based activism.

Once the reader has come to the end of Chapter 6 ('A Matter of Balance'), appendices offer further information on river activism, but especially valuable is the full translation of the *Yamunashatakam* of Rupa Gosvamin, a sixteenth-century theologian of the Gaudiya movement. It is this typical mixture of sectarian theology, local practices, and delight in nature which defines Haberman's distinctive voice. The strengths of this book, however, may also be its flaws: it focuses on a particular embodied divinity, and by being drawn into this aura of threatened sacrality one could easily be similarly enchanted. Yet, the academic habitus demands a critical distance as well, and requires that we also see the laudable initiatives in this book in the light of fashionable but often empty rhetorics on Hinduism's alleged eco-friendliness. While loving devotion to embodied divinity in India may often be more effective than the scientific approach, it is definitely not a panacea.

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