Review

Homo Ritualis: Hindu Ritual and its Significance for Ritual Theory, by Axel Michaels. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. xviii + 372 pp., \$105.00 (hb), \$39.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-190-26263-X (hb), ISBN 978-0-190-26263-1 (pb).

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This book, written by a well-known German Indologist, explores the complex world of Hindu ritual practices, which have befuddled scholars for centuries. Michaels is the right person to take on this task, since he has organized a series of conferences in Heidelberg on rituals and their efficacy over the years. Moreover, besides being a textualist, he has also conducted extensive fieldwork in Nepal, which also makes him an ethnographer. His book is not just something written for other scholars of South Asia, but for anyone interested in the role that ritual plays as an essential part of the human experience. To this end, the author leaves no stone unturned, as he meticulously pokes, prods, and teases out the various dimensions of rituals and the past theorizing about them.

In the introduction to the book, Michaels begins with a detailed overview of the field of ritual studies, its founding in the nineteenth century as a substitute for religion, defining what it means and does not mean, its application to India, where several categories of repetitive action are lumped together under the English term ritual, its role in the production of knowledge about specific cultures, and finally the dynamics of ritual, which incorporates contemporary theories of performativity. Once his general overview is complete, he turns his attention to India to discuss briefly the transculturality of Hindu ritual and his own methodological framework. Michaels refers to his approach as ethno-Indological, which means simply that he takes seriously the categories that Hindus themselves use in classifying the many practices they do on a daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly basis. It is this indigenous conceptualization that he finds somewhat missing from earlier theorizing. Having gone through a massive body of indigenous literature, the author tabulates a list of the components associated with ritual action: framing, formality, modality, and lastly transformation and meaning (i.e. the confirmation of identity, role, status, or authority (p. 32)). These four terms are then used to divide his book into four parts, each of dissimilar length.

In Part I he discusses the beginning of Hindu rituals, which requires the solemn intention (*saṃkalpa*) and the so-called greeting (*namaskāra*). Part II covers the rules (*vidhi*) of rituals. Here he draws heavily on his fieldwork in Nepal by using the Newar life-cycle as an extended illustration to expose the structural or 'grammatical' dimension of rituals that are embodied in ritual handbooks known as *paddhatis*, which emphasize competency and even, to a certain degree, playfulness. Part III focuses on individual and domestic rituals, as well as collective and public ones, which is then followed by a conclusion discussing the transcendental quality of performances related to these spheres of life and behavior. Part IV explores the various approaches used in the past, such as the 'cultural studies' approach and the 'cognitive sciences approach', before turning to the indigenous theories of *pūrvamīmāṃsā* to explain ritual efficacy. Part V provides a concluding summary, followed by an appendix, a useful glossary, extensive bibliography, and index.

Michaels' book attests to his lifetime spent studying rituals in their Hindu context. For the specialist, it provides thick descriptions of how rituals are performed on the ground, coupled with extensive exegesis of what Hindu ritualistic texts and manuals say about such practices. His ethno-methodological approach is certainly not the first attempt to provide an 'emic' or insider perspective on Hindu ritual, but it is, in my mind, the most exhaustive, thorough, and careful study. What makes the volume truly stand out is that it does not simply analyse Hindu rituals in a vacuum, but within the universe of ritual theory. Its interdisciplinarity is commendable and should make it relevant for specialists as well as to anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and others who study repetitive action, whether sacred or profane. Michaels deserves our applause for delving so deep into a seemingly unfathomable world of ancient and contemporary ritual practice among Hindus around the globe.