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Review

Feeding the Dead: Ancestor Worship in Ancient India, by Matthew R. Sayers. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. xvi + 188 pp., £64.00 (hb), £19.99 (pb). ISBN 978-0-19-991747-1 (hb), 978-0-19-989643-1 (pb).

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This book is a historical study of ancestor worship in early Sanskrit texts, from the *Ṛgveda* to the Dharmaśāstras. To explain and contextualize salient historical developments within the Brahmanical tradition, it also discusses ancestor worship in certain Buddhist texts. In doing so it makes a general argument about the development of Indian religion in the last centuries BCE. After an introduction outlining Vedic religion, the onset of Buddhism, and the study's sources and subject, the chapters proceed through the textual genres according to a standard chronology, then a four-page conclusion summarizes the overall argument.

Chapter 1 covers ancestral rites in the earliest Vedic texts. Here, and especially in the 'funerary hymns' of *Ṛgveda* 10.14–18, we root our concept of the ancestors (*pitṛs*). Having passed through the funeral fire they are associated with Agni, and they are also associated with the word *svadhā*—the offertory call in their honour, as differentiated from the call *svāhā* for the gods—and the moon. Chapter 2 discusses in particular the Śrautasūtras, which outline two grand solemn rites, the *piṇḍapitṛyajña* and the *pitṛyajña*. Sayers argues, against Willem Caland (*Altindischer Ahnencult*, 1893), that the *piṇḍapitṛyajña* is the older of the two. Performed monthly at new moon, the *piṇḍapitṛyajña* features a male sacrificer's ceremonial offering of rice-balls (*piṇḍa*s) and other vital items to his three nearest deceased patrilineal ancestors—though the rice-balls, offered onto the sacred grass, are not physically consumed by them, but at the close of the rite are disposed of into water, fire, or a living being's mouth. The second of the two *śrauta* rites, the *pitṛyajña*, is an annual autumnal rite held at full moon, and is also focused on sustaining the patriline. In the Śrautasūtras the contrast between offerings to gods and to ancestors is underlined by the association of the ancestors with the south, the number one, and the wearing of the sacred thread on the right shoulder.

Sayers suggests that 'incorporation of ancestor worship into the solemn ritual literature [in the form of these two rites] is best understood as the introduction of extra-textual practices into the solemn ritual cycle' (p. 48). It 'represents the perpetual efforts of the educated religious class that composed theological treatises to integrate religious practice and in the process secure for themselves the privilege to define the tradition and ensure a place for the ritual experts of their tradition in the practice of ancestor veneration' (p. 55). Such interpretations—in which authors act almost as the marketing division of a business corporation—are typical of the book; 'the Brahmins' are seen as pursuing their own interests via textual means. But this is difficult to substantiate; one might equally imagine the *śrauta* ritual developing according to its sponsors' demands.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the Gṛhyasūtras. These texts on domestic ritual detail two ancestral rites: the 'ninth-day ancestral offering', and the *śrāddha* rite which thereafter is the normative rite of ancestor veneration and the epitome of the concept. Both these rites include meat in the *piṇḍa*s along with rice, and involve professional brahmin guests—to be ceremonially fed at the rite's end, and to receive the *piṇḍa*s as stand-ins for the ancestors. The 'ninth-day ancestral offering' is made in four successive lunar months in the autumn and winter. The *śrāddha* takes several forms: the *ekoddiṣṭa śrāddha* sustains a recently deceased father while he is a ghost; the *sapiṇḍīkaraṇa śrāddha* installs him as an ancestor one year after death; the *pārvaṇa śrāddha* is the standard monthly rite feeding the three closest male ancestors during the waning of the moon; and the occasional *ābhyudayika śrāddha* boosts the ancestors and enlists their involvement in some auspicious event.

Chapter 5 views the Buddhists as the brahmins' main rivals and shows how Buddhist authors relate to—and attempt to appropriate—the *śrāddha* tradition. In the *Jāṇussoṇisutta* of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* and in two ghost stories of the *Petavatthu*, the Buddha confirms that *śrāddha* rites succeed in feeding the deceased and, more importantly, that offering them is meritorious even for Buddhists. The commentary on the second of the *Petavatthu* stories, 'Ghosts outside the Walls', involves the idea that hungry ghosts can molest the living for food. This idea, unmentioned in Sayers's treatment of Brahmanical texts, is well known to anthropologists, particularly where the ghost has no descendant to provide sustenance and has come to be sustained as a local god or goddess instead.

The last two chapters, 'Soteriology' and 'Mediation', focus on the Brahmanical Dharmasūtras and Dharmaśāstras in light of Buddhist competition, and constitute a concluding meditation upon developments in the period under study. The 'Soteriology' chapter deals with ancestral rites in light of the initially renunciate soteriology of escaping from or bringing an end to rebirth—a soteriology that apparently conflicts with the ritual aim of attaining heaven. The Dharmasūtras and Dharmaśāstras emphasize the importance of the householder ritualist and insist that performing ancestral rites yields eternal heavenly benefits.

To repay his ancestral debt a man must offer regular *śrāddha*, and produce a son who produces a son. Thus he hopefully ensures that he too will receive postmortem offerings; and in this way, he beats death. But since only three ancestors get a *piṇḍa*—no practicable *śrāddha* rite could give one to *every* ascending male ancestor—the ancestral afterlife appears to last only three generations (even if the *śrāddha* rite tries not to exclude the more distant ancestors altogether). If he has several sons who each have several sons who each have several sons, a deceased man can receive exponentially increasing numbers of *piṇḍa*s as he moves from father, to grandfather, to great-grandfather—and then the *piṇḍa*s stop. The desire for a more durable heaven is thus a natural consequence of the three-*piṇḍa śrāddha*; when Dharmasūtras and Dharmaśāstras assert that *śrāddha* performance yields eternal heaven, this exceeds the rite's obvious logic, and yet is demanded by that logic's limitations. Sayers's analysis rather neglects the existential implications of *śrāddha* feeding and doesn't connect the emphasis on eternal reward with the *piṇḍa* line's finitude; rather, for him that emphasis is just 'aimed at advancing a ritualists soteriology in defense against the encroaching renunciate soteriology' (p. 113).

Sayers discusses Dharmasūtra and Dharmaśāstra lists of *śrāddha* foods (predominantly meats) that satisfy the ancestors for progressively longer—even infinite—periods; but such lists prompt questions he doesn't address. Why would one offer, in a monthly rite, *piṇḍa*s that satisfy for more than a month? When double-value food (e.g. fish) is used, does this mean the householder need not offer *śrāddha* next month? When inexhaustibly satisfying food (e.g. rhinoceros meat, or sacred basil) is used, is that the last *śrāddha* that householder offers? Or are such foods used when a ghost is to be promoted, and a great-grandfather is receiving his final *piṇḍa*s? Or are the brahmin authors just trying to encourage householders to offer guests the finest dishes they can afford? (Though he doesn't make it, such a suggestion would fit Sayers's general view of brahmins.) Although it seems important to differentiate, on the one hand, the offering of food that feeds its recipient forever, and, on the other, an eternal reward for the offerer, the two could be connected when a man is leaving the ancestral system; and though he may be voluntarily converting to a *mokṣa*-style soteriology, he may equally have little choice, having no sons, or none who will reliably ensure that their descendants sustain the patriline. Not all men can go to ancestral heaven.

The final chapter, 'Mediation', discusses the role of religious expert. In ancestral rites, Sayers argues, the religious expert adopts the mediating role that Agni fulfils when gods receive offerings via the ritual fire. Regarding this mediating role, the Dharmasūtras and Dharmaśāstras emphasize that invited brahmins—the *de facto* recipients of *śrāddha* offerings—must be as learned as possible. Sayers argues that such emphasis aims to maintain support for the Brahmanically educated elite as opposed to other types of religious expert—primarily Buddhist ones, who criticize proud and ostentatious brahmins and

set up the Buddha and *saṅgha* as the most efficacious mediators and recipients of *dāna* offerings.

The emergence of the *śrāddha* as a primary site of contested gifting supplies the main prop for the book's overall argument about the development of South Asian religion: 'the *śrāddha*-rite became the model for a new mode of religiosity—valuing gifting especially—one that is constructed by the theologians of both traditions' (p. 130). The evidence Sayers presents supports this contention more securely for the Brahmanical than for the Buddhist tradition. And there is also a more general problem. With each Brahmanical genre (Śrautasūtra, Gṛhyasūtra, Dharmasūtra, Dharmaśāstra) Sayers carefully studies the texts of various schools, noting differences but justifying his generalizations about the developments evident in the genre as a whole. But these might just be developments in the way ancestral ritual is represented in Brahmanical texts; the actual performance tradition might have been quite stable through time, even from before the *Ṛgveda*. Sayers sometimes seems to acknowledge this, but he generally has to ignore it, since the history he tells, explains, and interprets is inevitably the history of surviving textual representations. As such, and as is often the case with Indological histories, the research methodology is not fully explicit. We have no good reason to doubt the developmental history Sayers tells; but it is hard to do history securely when the surviving evidence is scanty and may not represent anything much beyond itself.

One effect of the *śrāddha* rite is the construction and confirmation of patrilines. Here, and as so often in the study of 'religious' phenomena, there is a gender studies angle that the researcher all but ignores. The householder's wife is involved in the rites he performs, and in one account she may eat one of the *piṇḍa*s herself if he desires a son (pp. 59–61). Sayers notes that texts from the Gṛhyasūtras onwards tend to mention also the householder's female ancestors, and suggests that in other contexts the class of *pitṛ*s might be intended to include these (p. 154 n. 19); but nonetheless the impression given is paradigmatically unilinear.

Sayers presents and explains the salient passages in nice detail, and lists them summarily in a short appendix. The topic of Indian ancestor worship has been addressed before—most thoroughly by Caland's aforementioned *Altindischer Ahnencult* (1893), relevant sections of P. V. Kane's *History of Dharmaśāstra* (1930–1962), and D. R. Shastri's *Origin and Development of the Rituals of Ancestor Worship in India* (1963)—but although Sayers's book does not summarize these works or situate itself in relation to them, the collection and wholesale treatment of data from so many texts makes it a basic tool nonetheless. However, in many ways the most interesting texts on the topic are beyond the book's scope. Sayers's decision to stop with the Dharmaśāstras keeps the book compact, but its title is belied by the absence of proper treatment of ancestor worship in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, or the Purāṇas. The patriline the *śrāddha* rite invokes is seen to full effect in those texts, where a man's maintenance of his

piṇḍa line is mapped onto his maintenance of the patrimony he inherited and must pass on intact to his descendants. The short line of three ancestors is then presented in extended versions listing dozens, as if their quantity were to match the gravity of the present incumbent's ritual task. As Romila Thapar has said, 'genealogies ... are almost a cult of the dead' (*Cultural Pasts*, 2000: 709); and as explored, for example, in Marcelle Saindon's *Le Pitrikalpa du Harivamsha* (1998) and my own book *The Mahābhārata Patriline* (2009), there is a wealth of post-Vedic material on ancestor worship to complement Sayers's study and flesh out the Vedic ritual bones he has joined together.