

Review

Revelry, Rivalry and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals. Rachel Fell McDermott. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-231-12918 (hbk); 978-0-231-12919 (pbk). \$89.50/\$29.50.

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This book is a socio-cultural history of the major goddess festivals of West Bengal, Durga Puja and Kali Puja (and to a lesser extent, Jagaddhatri Puja). These have grown from private house ceremonies to large public events, and McDermott emphasizes the role of rivalry and social competition in this development. Today, these are some of the largest celebrations in West Bengal.

The first chapter describes the origins of the festivals among Bengali landowners and aristocrats, as signs of status and power. The more elaborate the rituals, the greater status the patron possessed. While the earliest literary references to the worship may be found in the sixth-century CE *Devi Mahatmya*, ritual worship is also mentioned in a variety of later Sakta puranas, and is detailed in poetry and writings from the twelfth century on. Aristocratic rituals involved food, wine, animals, music, and entertainment, and showed the power of kings and zamindars. The second chapter continues the historical description, focusing on the period of colonial rule.

The third chapter identifies Durga with the figure of Uma, the young wife of Siva. Earlier forms of Durga Puja included songs and poetry about Uma and her yearly visits to her natal family. While the modern festivals no longer emphasize Uma, remnants of her story can be found in the inclusion of young girls in the rituals, and the Bengali portrayal of Durga as a mother with four children (the deities Laksmi, Sarasvati, Kartik and Ganesa).

Chapter 4 describes the development of iconography, from early worship of a water pot and group of nine plants, to the more humanized and sexualized imagery popular today. While some locales keep older and more stylized images, other modern statues portray film stars and famous political figures. Chapter 5 discusses the *puja* in the streets, and the social and political ideas expressed by the statues. The basic story, the goddess fighting the buffalo demon Mahisa, can be made to stand for a variety of conflicts and concerns. It can show satire, censure or anxiety, though McDermott emphasizes the battle over prestige of the upper and middle classes. The imagery in the pandals is wide-ranging and creative.

Chapters 6 and 7, on the goddess Kali, are shorter chapters. They discuss Kali's background in tantric texts, and her festival shrines (which are more numerous but less publicized than Durga's). McDermott is interested in the ways that Kali's imagery

has been changed by the influence of bhakti devotion, becoming more respectable and gentrified for a middle-class audience. Chapter 8 discusses some controversies associated with the goddess festivals, including animal sacrifice and environmental pollution, and some modern protests and responses. Chapter 9 discusses the simplified and adapted rituals of Bengali immigrants in other countries, primarily the USA. The concluding chapter describes the ways that the goddess *pujas* reflect Bengali cultural identity, in its social and political rivalries, its longing for an idealized past, and its images of modern concerns. This chapter discusses the influences of commercialism, commodification, and rivalries in leadership, finance and organization.

This book is an interesting and clearly-written overview of the development of the *puja* rituals and images, primarily from the perspectives of middle and upper class sources. It includes literature and modern performance, and it explores the various levels of symbolism of the ritual. However, as the book focuses on events for the wealthy, it neglects folk perspectives, and thus omits the many local forms of the goddess Durga (like Vana Durga, Jaya Durga, Ugracanda Durga, and Durga Katyayani). It describes the urban single, static images of the goddess, but not the folk Navaratri ceremonies in which each of the nine nights has a different form of Durga.

The goddess Kali is described in her tantric origins, and her adaptation into the bhakti forms which are understood by McDermott to better fit middle-class values. But Kali's major role as protectress is neglected, and she is not mentioned as the goddess who saves her devotees from the pains of death, bringing good rebirth and entrance into her heaven. We do not have descriptions of Adya Sakti Kali, one of her most popular forms in modern West Bengal, and the Mahavidyas or tantric great wisdom goddesses are not mentioned, though they are often shown at the Kali Puja *pandals* or shrines, giving specialized forms of blessings to devotees. It would be also useful for the book to mention Kali's identification with universal consciousness, an approach which is important to many modern Sakta practitioners. Such understandings of the nature and forms of the goddesses are important for many Saktas whose approach is primarily devotional (and in West Bengal, bhakti worship often incorporates tantric ritual). Including such data would allow the reader to have a more comprehensive understanding of the reasons for the festivals, and the styles of worship of these goddesses.

This book includes issues of historical development, colonialism, ritual theory and modern adaptations of a popular regional festival. It would be useful for classes in Bengali Religion, History of India, South Asian Studies and Ritual Studies.