

Review

Reading Against the Orientalist Grain: Performance and Politics Entwined with a Buddhist Stain, by Syed Jamil Ahmed. Kolkata, India: Anderson Printing House Pvt. Ltd. (www.andersonindia.com), 2008. xv + 357pp. ISBN: 978-8-190671-90-3. Rs. 1500.

Reviewed by: Geoffrey Samuel, Cardiff University.
SamuelG@cardiff.ac.uk

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Syed Jamil Ahmed is a Bangladeshi scholar and theatre director, and founding chair of the Department of Theatre and Music at Dhaka University. He is probably best known for his innovative work with traditionally Bangladeshi theatrical forms, and for his academic study of these performances, many of which have strong religious and ritual components. His *Acinpakhi Infinity: Indigenous Theatre of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press, 2000) was a significant and insightful survey of village theatrical and ritual performances, based for the most part of the author's own field research. It included detailed descriptions of village theatrical performances relating to Kṛṣṇa, Rāma, Śiva, Kālī, and the Bengali snake-goddess Manasā, as well as a range of Muslim saints and legendary figures.

That book's title (a reference to the 'unknown bird' of human awareness in Lalon Fakir's Baul song) may have concealed the riches inside from some non-Bangla readers. Ahmed's new book again has a quirky title, this time reflecting an interest in post-colonial theory that underlies much of the contents (the author studied at Warwick in the late 1980s). *Acinpakhi Infinity* included a brief account of performances associated with Bangladesh's small surviving Buddhist population. *Reading Against the Orientalist Grain* includes a much lengthier study of Buddhist *kīrtan* from a village in Chittagong district, placed in the context of a series of chapters on Buddhist and Buddhist-related dramatic and ritual from elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia. These include the Indra Jātrā festival and the Caryā Nṛtya ritual dance tradition of the Kathmandu Valley Newars in Nepal, Sikkimese and Bhutanese festivals based around Tibetan Buddhist ritual dance performances (*cham*), Tibetan 'folk opera' (*a che lha mo*) as performed by Tibetan refugees in Dharamsala, as well as a Sinhala ritual performance in Sri Lanka (Devol Maduva), and Burmese puppet theatre (*yoke thay*) on Buddhist themes. The chapters have mostly been published previously, but the book version, beautifully produced in Kolkata, adds a wealth of colour illustration absent from the original publications.

Several of these ritual and theatrical forms are relatively unfamiliar, and have received little serious scholarly attention so far, so that this is valuable material simply as description and documentation. Even where there are previous studies, Ahmed's

postcolonial approach and his wide engagement with the current scholarly literature in both theatre and ritual studies adds a new and valued perspective. Despite their disparate publication contexts, and the variety of intellectual resources called upon in different chapters (Barthes, Foucault, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari among others), Ahmed has a consistent theme. This is the potential of ritual and theatre both to reinforce relations of power and also to contest and subvert them.

Performance is never static in Ahmed's analyses. It can be an instrument of the established order, but it also always has the ability to destabilize, to create movement or fluidity for audience or participants, and to articulate critiques of the powers that be. These issues come to the fore in analyses such as that of the Devol Maduva performance, with its muted and ambivalent messages about reconciliation of the warring partners in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, or the Bangladeshi study, which makes skilful use of Deleuze and Guattari's work to interpret how Bangladeshi Buddhists deal with their minority situation in Bangladesh. Ahmed's own experience, as a theatre director working in a Muslim-majority society where conservative and Islamist forces have a considerable presence, is never explicit in this book, but has undoubtedly sensitized him both to theatre's power of critique, and to its vulnerability.

At the same time, Ahmed's analyses are grounded throughout in careful and sensitive description. For all the theoretical sophistication and political awareness of these analyses, the author never loses sight of what is happening on the ground. The book should be of considerable value to scholars of South Asian religion and theatre, as well as providing a stimulating and insightful contribution to the role of these fascinating performance genres in contemporary societies throughout the region.