Religions of South Asia 2.2 (2008) 241-243
doi:10.1558/rosa.v2i2.241

ISSN (print) 1751-2689
ISSN (online) 1751-2697

Review

The Self Possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilization, by Frederick M. Smith. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. xxvii + 701pp. ISBN 0-231-13748-6 (hb), 0-231-51065-9 (electronic).

Deity and spirit possession feature prominently in ethnographic studies of South Asia yet are mostly absent from the classical religio-philosophical texts, and hence from normative presentations of 'Hinduism' (or 'Buddhism'). The author points to 'the tendency of Sanskritists and other scholars of Indian antiquity to disregard religious form not tied directly to texts'; similarly to 'the tendency of anthropologists and other ethnographers who distrust texts and are therefore not willing to look beyond their own ethnographies for...important antecedents in classical textuality'. His aim is 'to close these gaps' (p. 110), to build bridges between ethnography and Indology.

Smith brings a vast amount of material from both ethnographic and textual sources to produce a book that is encyclopaedic in scope. It will be an essential resource for researchers in the field of South Asian religion, though not everyone I suspect will read it from cover to cover. It is divided into chapters under four broad section headings and a detailed contents list enables readers to browse particular topics. The first two sections, after the preface and introduction, deal with theoretical approaches— 'orthodoxies' and 'paradigms' both religious and ethnographic. The third and fourth sections deal with notions, practices and narratives connected to 'possession' in Sanskrit literature. Part three covers the 'classical' texts—Vedas and Upaniṣads, epics (especially the *Mahābhārata*), asceticism and yoga, narrative literature (e.g. *Kathāsaritsāgara*), aesthetics, and finally a short chapter on *bhakti* ('Devotion as Possession'). The fourth section turns to the Tantras, classical demonologies and traditional medicine—including new translations from portions of the three primary Ayurvedic texts. At the end of the second section, a chapter on the terminology of 'possession' in regional languages derived from Sanskrit serves as a bridge between the ethnographical and literary sections, where the author traces the key concept of *āveśa*:

> I began thinking...that I could do justice to the subject by searching the texts for examples of *āveśa* (entrance into), the word used perhaps most widely for possession. This derives from the lexime *ā√viś* (to enter in)... Forms in *ā√viś* are nearly always distinguished from its close colleague *pra√viś* (to enter towards)... In... *ā√viś,* friendly, benign or self-motivated possession is indicated, while *pra√viś* more often indicates possession generated from outside (p. 14).

Both these roots go back to the Vedas and Upaniṣads. They are used for the invocation of deities and for the relation of the divine and human realms (Prajāpati 'entering' his creation and enlivening it). Since then an expanding 'vocabulary of possession' has multiplied its categories. *Āveśa* is used for every kind of strong emotion ('the kinder, gentler ancestor of possession') and for devotional ecstasy ('personal identification

with a deity is often interpreted as possession'). This kind of possession is invited and desired by the 'possessed'. *pra√viś* is used in a more active sense, like the skill of an advanced *yogin* to 'enter the body of another' (*parakayapraveśa*, although *āveśa* is used in a famous line from Patañjali's *Yoga sūtra*). Both these forms of 'possession' are usually regarded as benign (or at least neutral), because of the nature of the inhabiting force. For a malign or disease producing 'possession' a quite different set of words is used:

> derivatives from the root √*gṛh* (to grasp, seize), e.g., *graha, grahaṇa, parigraha...* Usually these convey a...malefic sense, an inimical entrance or hostile takeover, in which possession occurs independent of and even contrary to the intention of the one possessed (p. 14).

It is this last group of Sanskrit terms whose meaning corresponds more closely to the English word 'possessed'. English speakers may not readily see an affinity between *bhakti* -inspired devotional ecstasy and 'spirit possession'. This brings us to another focus of this study: the history of attitudes to 'possession' derived from a Protestant Christian inheritance that categorized spirits as demonic; and Smith contends that this inheritance stretches through Enlightenment thought into the positivist ideologies that support ethnographic theorizing. He acknowledges that more culturally sensitive approaches inform most recent work, even if anthropologists cannot go as far as he perhaps would like them to do in allowing the reality (at least from the 'emic' viewpoint) of an external realm of deities and spirits.

A third major focus of this book concerns concepts of the person, self, identity and embodiment in South Asia, and their relevance to the central importance of positive kinds of 'possession' in religious practice. In South Asia 'porousness of the self and the fluidity of personhood' contrast with a more unitary, integrated western model of identity. Ideas of incarnation (*avatāra*) and reincarnation contribute to different notions of embodiment.

Although his book highlights the limitations of the English term 'possession', Smith chooses to retain it 'though it may not work very well in some of the circumstances that I discuss' (p. 10). In view of what is to come this seems like a surprising understatement. It would have been helpful if somewhere near the beginning he had given us a concise definition of what *he* himself means by 'possession' while he cites and critiques definitions by others (e.g. pp. 10, 35). A summary of what possession 'is' and 'is not' occurs in the concluding chapter (pp. 597–98), but by this time one feels that, despite his awareness of the danger, the author is essentializing. Possession, he writes, is 'a complex phenomenon characterized by terms that convey broad semantic possibilities' (p. 597). This seems to overlook the fact that 'possession' itself is a term characterizing a phenomenon, and not the phenomenon itself. We have lost sight of its inadequacy. One obvious alternative is 'spirit mediumship', whose meaning is distinguished from that of 'possession' in a passage quoted from Peter Claus (p. 65). But Smith thereafter continues to use 'possession' in both these senses. Indeed, he seems assiduously to reject any alternatives, and this is possibly deliberate, for it is connected to its use in his title. To be 'self possessed' entails realizing that one's self is (like 'possession') 'multivocal'. But this is a subtle philosophical point, and takes us somewhat outside the academic use of the term.

Another problem is that while his discussion of differing Indian and western concepts of the person is valid and interesting, Smith rigidifies these into a dichotomy.

Thus he too readily sets an ahistorical, rational, integrated but limited Western 'self' which does not—or does not often—get 'possessed', over and against an Indian self marked by 'fluidity, divisibility and penetrability'. As a result, although discussing New Age 'trance channeling' as a western form of 'possession', he overlooks more culturally prominent examples, such as Spiritualism and Theosophy and the widespread charismatic Christian practice of 'speaking in tongues'.

This is a fascinating, profound and thought provoking book that well deserves close study and will undoubtedly have a significant influence.

Kathleen Taylor