Review


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Without a doubt, _Shaligram Pilgrimage in the Nepal Himalayas_ is an engaging and riveting read. The book recalls Walters’s fieldwork at Muktinath—a pilgrimage site in Nepal’s Mustang district—as well as briefer stints in Kathmandu and Kolkata. In recent decades, the temple of Muktinath has received much scholarly attention, yet Walters takes an altogether different approach, focusing instead on the worship of _shaligram_ s, or ammonite stones native to the region and collected for use in domestic shrines. Devotees from various religious traditions (many of them Hindu, Buddhist, and/or Bon practitioners) brave the hike to Mustang’s Kali Gandaki river to find _shaligram_ s, believing they engender auspicious outcomes for those who happen upon them.

At its heart, Walters’s monograph amplifies a recent debate in anthropology about non-human persons, an ‘ontological turn’ that is all the rage: in a nutshell, she argues that _shaligrams_ are ascribed an ontological agency, such that every stone assumes a multitude of possible personhoods (divinity, ancestor, object of worship, or fictive kin) and is venerated as a result. Moreover, the process by which these fossils are formed and course downstream parallels the human lifecycle from cradle to grave. Given that, _shaligrams_ are considered corporeal objects and/or persons, whose efficacy derives from the cultural connotations associated with their ‘birthplace’: a circuit inscribed with myths and a sacred river whence they all originated. As described by Walters’s informant: ‘a Shaligram is both made by the forces of the cosmos and contains those forces within it. This is how Shaligram can direct the forces around it, like karma and the spirits … and the people and the land. It is the land and holds the lands’ (p. 194). For Walters, the act of exchanging _shaligram_ fossils at Muktinath—and elsewhere—forges social ties between pilgrims, devotees, and _shaligrams_ themselves, by attuning them to a mythical terrain that surmounts any geopolitical or religious dividing line. One of Walters’s informants articulated this notion perfectly as follows:
‘people are much the same as plants. Plants grow where they grow. They don’t pay attention to government borders. Neither do people really’ (p. 64).

To Walters’s credit, the book gives voice to her informants at every turn, interlacing their anecdotes into the broader discussion. Not only does this bespeak her rigour as an anthropologist, but it also strengthens the force of her hypotheses. Often, an anthropologist’s work loses traction if first-hand narrations—gleaned in the field—are omitted. This is common opprobrium imputed to anthropological writing; a critique the author averts through the fastidious way she presents her material. Having said that, Walters’s attention to detail does, at times, hamper her writing, particularly in Chapter 3, where a longue durée history of Mustang is needlessly exhaustive in scope. Nevertheless, the book forms a coherent whole, with every chapter examining a different angle, literally from the ground up, starting with a detailed prolegomenon and including the geological background of shaligram fossils, an ethnography at Muktinath, discussion of its political ramifications, and of the commodification of shaligrams in cyberspace.

Quite simply, Walters’s book is a trailblazing ethnography which breaks theoretical ground hitherto unexplored in pilgrimage studies, by moving towards an ‘object-oriented’ perspective. And yet, one is left wondering why a monograph about far-flung field sites and sacred stones is devoid of illustrations. While the author’s fieldwork is well documented and evocatively written, no figures or maps grace the book’s pages. Arguably, this is one of the text’s central deficiencies, since it inhibits the reader’s capacity to apprehend the landscapes recounted so lucidly by Walters. All that notwithstanding, Walters’s book is an excellent contribution, which provides great insights into South Asian pilgrimages, practices, and their political clout.