

Book Reviews

Chandola, Sudha. *Entranced by the Goddess: Folklore in North Indian Religion*. Loughborough: Heart of Albion Press, 2007. xvi + 205 pp., 12 b&w photos, Pb. ISBN-13: 9781905646081. £12.95.

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The goal of this volume is to describe a few important features of the North Indian Goddess tradition. Her research is split into two focused components. “Part One” concerns folklore in its many guises, such as songs, myths, mantras, and textual sources. In “Part Two,” she delves into the use of trance in relation to Hindu goddesses. In this section Chandola provides four case studies where trance has occurred, some instances of which include extreme austerities such as licking hot metal. She concludes with her outlook on the future of goddess worship in the North of India.

Initially Chandola provides some background to the bulk of her research through a brief summation of Hindu textual categories. She states while goddesses were present in the Vedas, their role was minimal compared with their male counterparts. She argues that the Epics developed goddesses in two ways: firstly by introducing a new pantheon of deities which have taken the forefront in contemporary worship and secondly by planting the first seeds of the “Great Goddess” concept. The Great Goddess does not fully come into her own until the Puranic period. Here, Chandola focuses on the *Devi Mahatmya* as a vital text that cements the ultimate nature of the Great Goddess while also providing devotees with guidelines that pertain to her worship. Finally, Chandola describes three modes of goddess worship: one, through pilgrimage to holy sites devoted to various form of the Goddess, the *pithas*, two, through the *Tantras*, both as texts and as specialized forms of ritual practice, and three, through *bhakti*, the most common form of worship, which occupies a central role in the folkloric tradition.

From this point forth Chandola largely leaves the background material behind and focuses on her field-work. She commences with a discussion on devotional songs, which she divides into two categories:

narrative songs saved for longer ceremonies and usually recited by professionals, and non-narrative songs, which can be sung by anyone and commonly used at the temple and throughout one's day. Non-narrative styles include songs of pilgrimage, offerings, awakening, homecoming, and those allotted to specific times of the day, such as morning and evening. Narrative songs are often accompanied by instruments and presented to larger audiences who come to hear longer stories of deities or people. Since there are no written versions of many of these songs, they are frequently modified as they are passed down through each generation.

Following this Chandola begins to describe different types of folk tales that relate directly to the Mother Goddess. These are comprised of two types including those that deal with general subject matter and those that relate to ritual fasts. The first category glorifies the Goddess while introducing children to appropriate value systems. Ritual stories have particular restrictions placed upon them, such as who should partake in the fast and when. These stories are not merely tales for enjoyment's sake, rather they constitute a ritual in and of themselves. While both sexes may partake in these rituals the most complex fasts are practiced by women who work in the home and have a greater ability to observe more facets of the ritual. After discussing the two major types of folk tale, Chandola includes descriptions and stories of several goddesses, from the very popular like such as Lakshmi to the more obscure like such as Hoi. In a later chapter, Chandola follows a similar process for attendants of the Goddess, such as Hanuman.

Chandola's section on Oral Traditions (Part 1) is rounded out by a discussion on folk mantras. These mantras are recited silently and treated with the same reverence as a deity. Emphasis is placed on proper pronunciation and initiation via a guru. According to Chandola people recite mantras in order to gain a sense of spiritual bliss, to obtain *siddhis* for positive purposes or to use them for negative purposes. Chandola equates these three purposes with the three *gunas*.

Part Two is more focused than the first half of the book. While the first section jumps around from songs to folk tales to mantras and more, the second deals primarily with four case studies of trance.

According to Chandola, her Hindu Brahmin status did not only allow her increased access to specialty rituals, but it also enabled her to have “actively participated in the ritual performances” (130). Her four examples of trance include a girl believed to be possessed by a goddess, a psychic whose medium was barley seeds, a healing ritual involving the licking of hot metal, and finally an all night ritual known as a *jagaran*, which involved the possession of dancers.

Chandola concludes her book with an outlook on the future of goddess worship. She begins by discussing modern forms of the Goddess, which have been popularized by film, Hindu nationalism, or are very localized, such as Santoshi Mata, Bharat Mata and Vaibhava Devi respectively. She argues that the seemingly rapid introduction of new goddesses and loss of old goddesses are accepted unproblematically by most Hindus because the phenomenon fits the characterization that the goddess can manifest and unmanifest forms of herself as necessary. Chandola predicts that, overall, goddess worship in India is not in danger of disappearing. However, as technology becomes more commonplace in villages, as large family households dwindle, and as women enter the workforce, the varied practices of the goddess-centered folk traditions will suffer.

As a whole, Chandola’s book offers several informative examples of devotional songs, folklore and trance. Her book is presented in an accessible style, making it easy to understand for undergraduate students or non-academics. Unfortunately, a key pitfall is her failure to define her target audience, which seems to include academic specialists. However, Chandola does not present her research with sufficient scholarly rigor to appeal to such more advanced readers.