

# REVIEWS

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**Hindu Samskaras:  
Socio-religious Study of  
the Hindu Sacraments**

Rajbali Pandey

Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 41,  
U A Bungalow Road, Jawahar Nagar,  
Delhi 110 007. Website: [www.mldb.com](http://www.mldb.com). 2013. xxvii + 327 pp. ₹ 395.

One of the ways in which existence is made to precede essence is to deny a contingent being of agency. That is, Hindus are made to say that they exist spatio-temporally first and thus are Hindus. Any deviation from this imperialist cartographical normativity is decried as being an extremist position. What is a measured structuralist position is imposed on them as the universal Truth. This coercive reading of history has been sadly pushed down Hindu throats by the likes of Sumit Sarkar, Romila Thapar, and R S Sugirtharajah—see the introduction to *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* for references to Romila Thapar's positions regarding Hinduism and India and her incorporation within South Asian Christians' garbled theological discourse. Stopping here the parody of the jargon in which they write, they seem to not agree that Hinduism is either a true religion or that it is *sanatana*, eternal. They all agree that Hindus are defined by their geography as a heterogeneous people living beyond the Indus, and Christian scholars feel the huge forest-dwelling population are not Hindus—see the journal *Jivan*, issues of 2013–14, for a critique of Hindu efforts at inclusion. Therefore, for these people Hindu identities are just matters of simple mapping. By this logic, someone living in the US born to Christian parents cannot become a Hindu since Hindu intelligentsia cannot see Hinduism as either an open 'Hospitalable' religion in the sense of Emmanuel Levinas.

According to them, other religions are definitely God-given by definition, these scholars maintain that Hinduism is just an accretion of staid beliefs, rituals, and weird mumbo-jumbo that serves to marginalise those who participate in this faith community. According to the leading lights of religious studies like Wendy Doniger and Kancha Ilaiah, author of the book *Why I am Not a Hindu*, Hinduism is an absurdity, for they have all scrutinized and judged Hindu faith and found it vacuous—but good enough to build their careers on!

It is against this rabidly anti-Hindu polemics that has vitiated Indian academics that the efforts of Rajbali Pandey must be situated. The text under review proves that Hindu rituals, the very way of *being in time*, that is, Hindu samskaras, are eternal and invest spatio-temporality to Hindu essences. Hindus, as a faith community, are essential first and then these samskaras validate their existence within time and space. The Hindu samskaras prove that they are part of that eternal Being who has become many. Their samskaras remind them that they are in fact children of that effulgent Being who is in all. Pandey's book detailing Hindu samskaras is a strong argument against forces that would determine Hindus as being purely historically constrained. Pandey resituates transcendence to millions of lives lived with fidelity to their Hindu patrimonies.

Hinduism is a celebration of life in the *here and the now*. Hindus do not live for another world to come; they are urged by their canonical scriptures to realize the Divine in the present moment. They do not hold that the *sarx* is fallen; nor do they hold that asceticism, for its own sake, has any value. Hindu faith celebrates, on the one hand, those who begin their journey into the knowledge of Brahman and on the other, those who having gained that knowledge

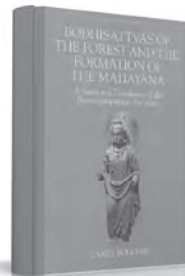
decide to marry and through their progeny pass on this divine wisdom gained by a direct experience. All these stages—the start of chaste studies to marriage—are explicated with a natural thoroughness by Pandey.

One very important observation made in this book needs to be extrapolated: at the end of Chapter 3 Pandey speaks of a real crisis in Hindu faith. The language of Hindu rituals and chants are not accessible to the commoner and thus seem abstruse to the ordinary tech-savvy Hindu. It is here that Hindus as a faith community must adopt and learn from one of the greatest religions of the world, which teetered at the edge of obsolescence near the middle of the last century. The average Roman Catholic did not understand a word of the Latin Mass being said throughout the globe by their clergy. The Second Vatican Council took a radical decision—they had scholars and scholarly committees translate the whole liturgy into vernaculars, and these are still being translated by experts into various indigenous languages. Bible scholars have of course to learn at least four languages: Hebrew, Latin, the two forms of Greek, and Aramaic. Roman Catholics worldwide now read the *Jerusalem Bible*, for instance when they want to theologize as Catholics. Hence that religion adapted itself and is able to proselytize—for instance, throughout India after Holy Mass, the parish priest or the Catholic nuns, say ‘Jai Jishu’ to everyone in India’s Hindi heartlands. If Hindus as a faith community have to reach out to others who are in imminent danger of being alienated from the Sanatana Dharma, they need to have experts of the calibre of Pandey, the late Swami Gambhiranandaji of the Ramakrishna Order, and scholarly monks of this and other Orders to engage in serious works of translation and linguistic assimilation of all Hindu samskaras into English and vernacular languages. The larger world can then understand directly Sanatana Dharma. If they wait that future generations will learn Sanskrit and then access Hindu canonical scriptures, then Pandey’s efforts will be in vain. This scholarly book has been published by one of the best publishers within the field of Indian studies, but does that mean that this book will help the tired IT professional at Bengaluru explain her faith to

a foreigner who might want to know why there is feasting after a Hindu death. If this Hindu sister is unable to explain this at that very moment, Hindu faith will be ridiculed by the likes of Ilaiah. And Pandey gives the reasons for a feast after a Hindu death, at the end of his scholarly tome. The need of the times is that Hindus immediately create greater accessibility to these kinds of works among the general populace. Pandey deserves to be known beyond the closed Indology group. Such texts, as this one under reviews, needs to be made accessible to all those who quest for their identities, including those of the Semitic religions. This book fends off attacks against the barbarians at our doors.

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***Bodhisattvas of the Forest  
and the Formation of  
the Mahāyāna***

Daniel Boucher

Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2011.  
xxiv + 288 pp. ₹ 595.

Doctrines are the results of experiments involving tremendous sacrifice and, many a times, tremendous restraint. All major religious traditions have witnessed, in their formative years, enormous asceticism and spiritual disciplines causing bodily privation. It is such asceticism that gives a solid foundation to the tradition. Once the religious tradition is fairly established, often physical austerity takes a backstage. For this very reason, sometimes the best way to trace the roots of any tradition is to trace the physical austerities of the early masters of that path. While this is true, it is equally true that in many religious traditions the careful upkeep of the body has been prescribed to take away the mind from the body. Mahayana also has a rich past of carefully maintaining the physical body. The wonderful integration of asceticism and glorification of body in this tradition is an interesting study. Boucher has quite