IMMA RAMOS:
*Pilgrimage and Politics in Colonial Bengal: The Myth of the Goddess Sati*. xi, 126 pp. London and New York: Routledge, 2017. £90. ISBN 978 1 4724 8944 9.
doi:10.1017/S0041977X1700115X

In nineteenth-century Bengal, the region in India that first felt the catalyst of colonial modernity, Hindus underwent a transition from communities centred around locality and kinship, to new structures of belonging and identity that extended to a more encompassing sense of nation and religious affiliation. To some extent this transformation emerged from the encounter with colonial forms of government and ideology drawn from British society. More important, but less well understood, are the ways in which this transformation towards modernity emerged organically from roots planted deep in the soil of the Indian landscape and its webs of stories, ritual practices and religious sentiments far from the centre of gravity of the colonial state in shrines and pilgrimages. While the British held dominance over economic, administrative disciplinary control, they were more restrained with regard to Hindus' religious practices. Consequently, religion was drawn upon to give form and texture to an emerging India as the body of the divine mother – Mother India.

Imma Ramos' book *Pilgrimage and Politics in Colonial Bengal* invites a new look at how the resources of traditional religious narratives and practices were drawn upon by both elite and popular actors to generate a new yet familiar imagined community. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, she argues, "the fragmented motherland was re-imagined by many as one unified subcontinent through the empowerment of Shaktism and the rhetoric of the goddess as bio-territory" (p. 7). The centrepiece of the book's narrative is the goddess Sati, the wife of Shiva, who underwent self-immolation, dismemberment and distribution of her body parts – a primal sacrifice in which her distributed body was planted across the landscape and reborn in a network of shrines, the Shaktipithas, sometime after the eighth century CE. Each of her parts – eyes (Tarapith), head, heart, ankles, toes (Kalighat), breast, genitals (Kamakhya) – became a shine that re-embodied her as a goddess, together with Shiva in his ferocious form as Bhairava.

This core Hindu story forms the charter myth of some 51 shrines, called Shaktipithas, across the lower Himalayas and Nepal, with particular concentration of temples in Assam and Bengal. In Calcutta itself, the centre of British modernity, the local shrine to Sati, known as Kali, linked the local, regional, and national sense of the land itself as the divinely feminine.

With this general framework sketched out Ramos undertakes case studies of three Shaktipith shrines in Bengal and Assam: Kali in Calcutta, Kamakhya in Gauwhati (Assam), and Tara in Tarapith, Each of these sites stands on its own as a centre of pilgrimage and devotion while also being linked through the story of Sati's dismemberment to the region and nation-as-motherland. Pilgrimages to these centres of power (*shakti*) engaged both personal aspirations of the pilgrims and a connection to a larger network of affiliation that takes on increasing political resonance as the twentieth century approached.

In addition to working through the ways in which the myth of Sati as the one-and-the-many form of divine presence for Bengali Hindu sentiments, the author focuses on the material culture of the shrine. In Kalighat especially, the production of inexpensive paintings sold in the bazaars around the temple generated a new genre of religious art, Kalighat paintings. These paintings offered a form of sacred

capital that connected devotees with the shrine and migrated back with the pilgrims to their homes for display.

The following chapter explores the form of Sati as Kamakhya in Assam. At this shrine more than the others the issues of gender and divinity are most explicitly presented. It was Sati's *yoni* (sexual organ) that fell at this spot when her body was cut apart. Here devotees migrate in large numbers in search of the goddess' blessing for fertility, health, and well-being.

Next the author turns to the shrine at Tarapith where Sati is known as Tara. What is distinctive about this place is its focus on tantric and intense devotional practices by ascetics and charismatic holy men. This shrine offered an alternate reality apart from the urban colonial regime in nearby Calcutta. The modern temple was built in 1818 from the patronage of a wealthy Calcutta businessman.

The penultimate chapter brings together these various threads of myth, ritual, sacred place, material culture, and the making of shared colonial Hindu identity edging steadily from the local and regional to the national. Here Ramos places in the foreground the debates within Hindu communities and colonial and missionary critiques of "idolatry". What emerges from this process is a new and robust iconographic tradition that benefits from new technologies of lithography and print culture. The book's abundant collection of photographs and paintings gives the reader a rich sense of how things "looked", and how the centrality of the visual that has been part of Hindu tradition for millennia adapted to the process of retrieval and novelty that the colonial moment presents.

Ramos weaves a narrative from the threads of traditional religious practices, shrines, visual culture, and politics into a whole cloth that gives us a better sense of the Bengali imagination undergoing its transformations of modernity in its distinctive way. Highly recommended.

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ADITYA MALIK:
*Tales of Justice and Rituals of Divine Embodiment: Oral Narratives from the Central Himalayas*.
xx, 295 pp. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. £64. ISBN 978 0 19 932509 2.
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Malik's book is both an ethnography about the cult of a local Nepalese deity, Goludev, "the God of Justice in the Central Himalayan province of Kumaon", and a broader reflection about key anthropological notions, such as those of justice and spirit possession, the whole thing embedded within more philosophical considerations about Being, the everyday, the self, the other (or rather: *another*), embodiment, and so on.

As for the empirical basis of his research, the author has combined analysis of numerous written petitions addressed to Goludev and his assistants in the deity's shrines (especially ch. 4, pp. 89–139, and appendix 2, pp. 241–4), study of the legends of Goludev and his assistants Kalbisht and Gangnath, and extensive field research, with direct observation of the *jāgar* rituals (including their aspect of music and dance performance and the question of possession).