

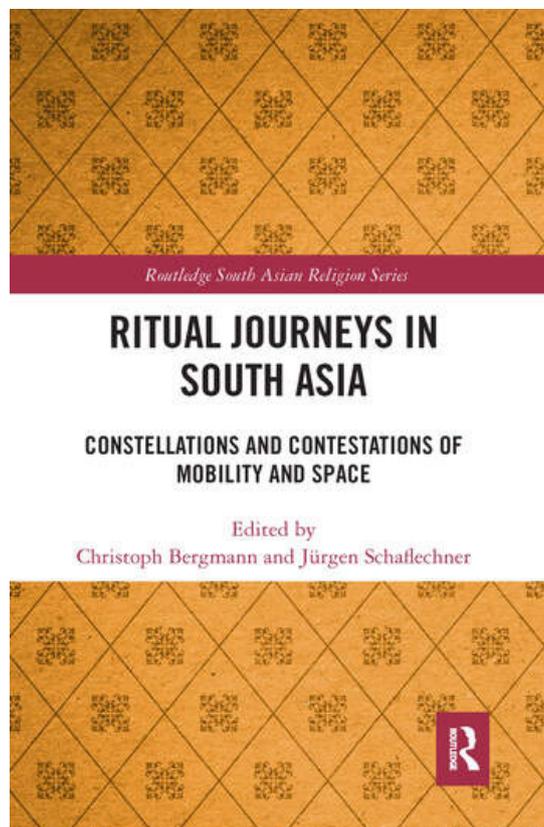
Book Review

Review of *Ritual Journeys in South Asia: Constellations and Contestations of Mobility and Space* edited by Christoph Bergmann and Jürgen Schaflechner

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In 1985, *The Drama Review* 29(3) published a special issue on “processional performance,” which covered pilgrimages and processions across the world and their linkages with performance studies scholarship. Thirty-five years later, the dynamics of space, mobility, and pilgrimage are again addressed in *Ritual Journeys in South Asia: Constellations and Contestations of Mobility and Space*, edited by Christoph Bergmann and Jürgen Schaflechner. The origin of the book can be traced to a conference on ritual journeys at Heidelberg University’s International Science Forum in 2012, in which some of the authors participated. Pilgrimage, understood as a sacred form of travel, is certainly not a new concept for scholars of South Asia or the Himalayas. Yet, instead of taking this category for granted, *Ritual Journeys* breaks disciplinary silos through its interdisciplinary framework of contextualizing the ritualized movement of people through space. Each chapter of the edited volume skillfully demonstrates how space and mobility across territories are constantly re-created, contested, and re-vitalized through ritual journeys and their “strategies of ritualization” (p. 2). In essence, the book argues that site (space) and route (mobility) are interconnected and mutually constituted.

Drawing on pilgrimage studies, *Ritual Journeys* interrogates the ritualization of movement, exhaustive traveling, and participation in fieldwork. It combines case studies about significantly different forms of mobility, such as a strenuous trek undertaken by Ladakhi nomads to the holy lake of Rewalsar, also known as Tso Pema, in Himachal Pradesh. Here, a thick description of the pilgrimage done by author Nike-Ann Schröder with Tibetan refugees brings three layers together: geographical landscapes, tantric ritual practices, and personal memories of the author/pilgrim’s own past. Contrastingly, Deepra Dandekar takes a narrative analysis approach in deciphering

the “shrine literature” (p. 181) of a religious monument in Viśālgadh, Maharashtra. Additionally, Michel Boivin’s fieldwork in Sehwan Sharif in northern Sindh, Pakistan shows how diverse communities such as Shias, Sunnis, Ismailis, and even Hindus disagree over the interpretation of a saint and its shrine for centuries.

The book also discusses ritual journeys that invoke divine possession and powers. The processions of *Jākh devtā* in the Garhwal Himalayas, described by Karin Polit, and of *Mahāsu*, the divine king of the Western Himalayas, discussed by Lokesh Ohri, show how local communities continue to follow the ritualized regimes of their ruling deities. Both ritual journeys allow devotees to transform the cultural memory of the deity through embodied affects where local histories are relived through procession and possession.

“Each chapter of the book skillfully demonstrates how space and mobility across territories are constantly re-created, contested, and re-vitalized through ritual journeys.”

- Vineet Gairola on *Ritual Journeys in South Asia*

Rather than describing rituals as already predetermined, the edited volume provides a covert critique of such a theorization by demonstrating that rituals are a dynamic play in which variations are not only possible but highly likely. Hence, the case studies are grounded in varied contexts and unique cultural dynamics that shape the everyday lifeworlds of people. Furthermore, ritual journeys are also marked by organizational challenges, tensions, and negotiations. This becomes apparent in chapters that focus on the ambivalent and difficult ways through which planning and journeying of people come together as ritual action. For example, in describing the Anglo-Indian pilgrimage of *Vailankannī Mātā*, Robyn Andrews and Brent Otto reflect on how Catholicism is mixed with Hindu rituals to illustrate the importance

of contextualizing the processual nature of procession.

The book unearths how ritual journeys are produced in South Asia's culturally varied, politically charged, and socio-economically uneven landscapes. It broadens the conceptual scope of classical pilgrimage studies by delving into the revitalization of pilgrimage practices through empirically rich case studies. For example, the modification of devotional songs by young people participating in a Buddhist pilgrimage to Sri Pada in Sri Lanka demonstrates that youth are "innovators" or "social shifters" (p. 145) in transforming pilgrimages. *Ritual Journeys* is a venture that goes beyond orientalist stereotypes by documenting the importance to address the relationship between religious and non-religious processes given the fast-paced socio-economic changes in the broader South Asian region.

Ritual Journeys effectively conveys that each South Asian community creates its own cosmos through pilgrimages. Each chapter skillfully demonstrates how movement is not just about covering distance but holds symbolic and ceremonial importance as well. Ritual movement promises peace and security by connecting with the environment in a manner where personal and collective experiences fuse with each other. *Ritual Journeys* showcases how fieldwork put into writing enables the reader to understand the *Weltanschauung* of a people. The book is structured around a socio-spatial perspective which, in my view, can be understood as an extension to the concept of "eco-sociality" (Whitmore 2018) in that it allows scholars of South Asia to make connections among deities, processions, and the environment.

Drawing on Tim Cresswell (2010), *Ritual Journeys* proposes an understanding of the "new mobilities paradigm" (p. 4) that theorizes the ever-changing geographies of ritual journeys. Accordingly, space is not seen as a fixed entity but rather as constantly created, contested, and transformed through movement. The importance of pilgrimages lies in the practice of

embedding the relation of people with a deity "into their being-in-the-world" (p. 81). Although the book redefines space and movement for the reader, paying attention to the spiritual work of a pilgrim during a ritual journey would have enabled an even broader understanding of mental phenomena and processes within the framework of pilgrimages, deities, and religious sites. For example, applying Donald Winnicott's (1971) theory of "transitional space" would have allowed elaborating on a space of experience that is in between the inner and the outer worlds of a pilgrim, neither totally objective nor totally subjective, which bestows symbolic power to the pilgrimage in the context of South Asian ritual journeys.

An eloquent examination of cultural expression and community interaction, *Ritual Journeys* asks questions about politics, power, agency, and the ever-changing meaning of culture. The book provides not only a history of the field of ritual journeys and pilgrimages but an outlook into the future as well. It demonstrates that the modalities of relating to particular spaces and places are transforming. By focusing on pilgrimage, ritual movements, and socio-spatial ideas across the Garhwal Himalayas, Maharashtra, Tibet, Sri Lanka, and Sindh, the book takes an interdisciplinary approach and examines important themes for scholars and students interested in anthropology and religious studies, as well as in South Asian and Himalayan area studies.

Vineet Gairola is a Ph.D. Candidate in Psychology at the Indian Institute of Technology, Hyderabad. His research focuses on ritual practices and processional journeys of devī-devtās (Hindu deities) in India's Garhwal Himalayas. Most recently, Vineet Gairola received the Stephen Mitchell Award given by APA (Division 39), the Psychoanalytic Research Exceptional Contribution Award by IPA, and the ANHS Asian Student Membership Scholarship.