

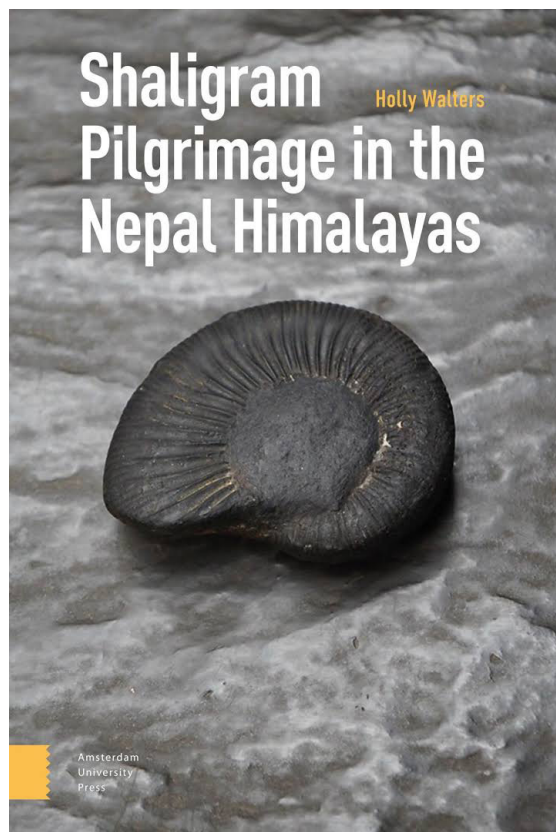
Book Review

Review of *Shaligram Pilgrimage in the Nepal Himalayas* by Holly Walters

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Holly Walter's *Shaligram Pilgrimage in the Nepal Himalayas* focuses on shaligrams, a particular ammonite fossil found in riverbeds and on banks in the Kali Gandaki Valley of Nepal's Mustang district, which are considered sacred in Hindu ritual practice throughout the Indian subcontinent and among the global diaspora. Based on Walters' extensive research, the book provides a detailed examination of these "living fossils" (p. 13) and the various traditions of their veneration. Regarded as a manifestation of Vishnu, shaligrams are believed to represent a natural form (*swarupa*) of the divine that does not require consecration. They have agency, and as such, they can form meaningful connections with people and other shaligrams, acting as kin across time and space. As Walters writes, "a Shaligram is symbolic movement made physically manifest" (p. 16). For devotees, shaligrams represent both fossils and living entities: "to be in the presence of a Shaligram is to be in the constant presence of the gods themselves" (p. 16). In Hindu devotional practice, it is common to undertake pilgrimages to the Kali Gandaki Valley to collect shaligrams. Thus, these fossils become a significant object of exchange between Nepal and India.

In eight chapters, Walters provides extensive scholarly discussion about the shaligrams' movements, meanings, and relationships. Introducing the theoretical and anthropological framework of her shaligram ethnography, Chapter 1 explores the geological formation and social significance of these living fossils. Then, by engaging with discourses on religion, science, and place-making practices, Chapter 2 focuses on the ways in which shaligrams constitute divine persons. Chapters 3 and 4 describe the Mustang region, the important temple site of Muktinath, and current issues of migration, as well as the tension between

the sacred and political landscapes in which shaligrams are collected and exchanged. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 present the core of Walters' ethnographic material, which is based on stories, experiences, and narratives of shaligram pilgrims and devotees. She shows how mobility, identity, and pilgrimage are connected as shaligrams "become capable of being both from a place and carrying that place with them" (p. 197). The final chapter is particularly interesting because it examines how shaligrams transcend national boundaries by presenting an integral part of diasporic and online communities and how this changes the relationship between devotees and fossils. Throughout the book, Walters refers to her investigation of shaligrams as an "ethnography of the lives of stone persons and their communities" (p. 64). Acknowledging the limitations of being unable to "interview" shaligrams, she looks at the interactions between shaligrams and humans, how devotees perceive shaligrams, and how

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- Vineet Gairola on *Shaligram Pilgrimage in the Nepal Himalayas*

they are embedded in ritual landscapes. In summary, Walters argues that the life of shaligrams cannot be fully understood on its own but only in relation to human life and practice.

Walter acknowledges that shaligrams are not only revered by Vaishnava, Shaiva, and Smarta Hindu devotees but also by India's Jains, as well as by followers of the Bon and Buddhist religions of Tibet and the upper Himalaya. She demonstrates that shaligrams form a bridge between long pilgrimages and daily worship because devotees place them on altars in their homes. As such, the book is as much an ethnography of shaligrams as

it is a study of their movement. According to a Hindu devotee, “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). Shaligrams are shaped by various geological processes and move downwards along the Kali Gandaki River. In their pilgrimages, devotees attempt to venture to the source of the river, which they are not always able to complete because of Mustang’s challenging mountain geography. By moving with shaligrams, shaligram practitioners, and their internet communities, Walters shows that the desire to form a relationship is as strong for a person as it is for a shaligram. Her book builds upon and expands the anthropology of things by theorizing the “social lives” of shaligrams and understanding the interconnectedness and intimacy of human-object relationships through movement.

Based on her ethnography, Walters relates emotional stories from her interlocutors, from “elderly men, attentive sons, devout mothers, and ascetic widows” (p. 48). These people formed intimate connections with shaligrams that were passed down through generations. However, their stories also reflect their fears as more information about shaligrams becomes widely available. Many devotees are afraid that shaligrams will lose their value as sacred objects. Walters also argues that the term “fossil” holds a specific geological and paleontological meaning, while the term “shaligram” refers to generational memories and religious relationships. Throughout the book, Walters successfully shows that our experience of the world is not necessarily reducible to the actual material of the world. Devotees bestow emotional and empathetic layers of stories onto shaligrams, reinforcing their potency as sacred objects. As Walters notes, “the gods do not come to inhabit them nor are Shaligrams strictly symbolically representative of deities. They *are* them” (p. 37, author’s emphasis).

Shaligram Pilgrimage in the Nepal Himalayas offers readers a unique and immersive experience for readers. It is designed to provide the same level of care and attention to shaligrams as is typically observed by a dedicated

shaligram practitioner, thus enabling readers to gain a deeper understanding of these sacred objects and the people who revere them. The book skillfully demonstrates that the ritual practices around shaligrams transcend nationality, caste, and religion because people from three different religions (Hindu, Bon, and Buddhist) undertake pilgrimages to obtain shaligrams. Walters’ scholarship has opened new doors to the anthropology of religion and material relations. The book is a valuable source for scholars and students of South Asian religions, Himalayan area studies, and pilgrimage studies, as well as anyone interested in challenging the boundaries of what one thinks religion is.

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