

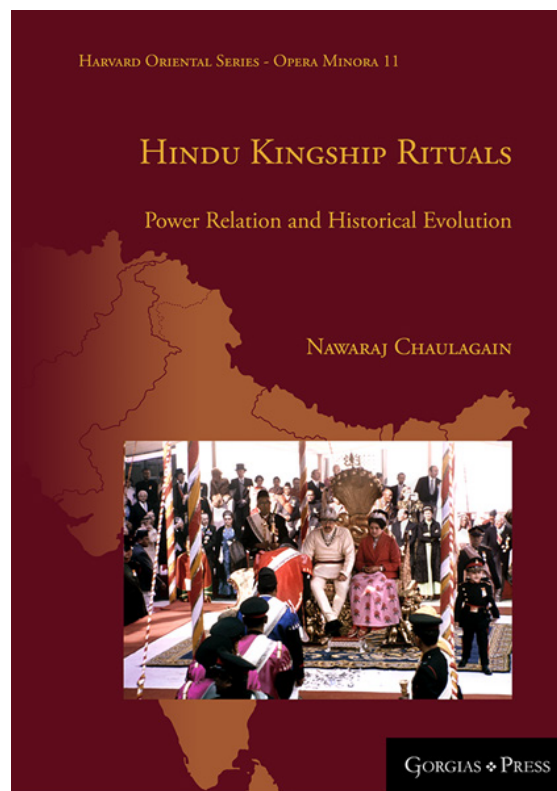
Book Review

Review of *Hindu Kingship Rituals: Power Relation and Historical Revolution* by Nawaraj Chaulagain

Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2019. 408 p. ISBN: 9781463240479

Reviewed by Stefan Lueder

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2023.8857>



Recommended Citation

Lueder, S. (2023). Review of *Hindu Kingship Rituals: Power Relation and Historical Revolution* by Nawaraj Chaulagain. *HIMALAYA* 42(1): 169-172.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Within the academic literature on Hindu kingship rituals in South Asia, Nepal and the Himalayan region have been comparatively understudied. The existing scholarship has for a long time relied on practices of participant observation by social and cultural anthropologists. But their accounts often faced multiple limitations, primarily because they had only limited access to rituals that were performed in seclusion. And beyond that, without additional historic evidence that the rituals observed in the late 20th and early 21st century were a continuation of the rituals practiced in the past, these accounts implicitly leave us with a rather static understanding of these rituals. By drawing on a great variety of primary textual sources and combining them with ethnographic observations, interviews, photographs, and secondary literature, Nawaraj Chaulagain's monograph *Hindu Kingship Rituals: Power Relation and Historical Evolution* contributes significantly to closing this research gap. The book is divided into three parts and further includes three appendices that provide additional information and photographs of other popular kingship rituals in Nepal, such as the coronation of King Birendra in 1975.

Chaulagain's monograph is a commendable work of scholarship that explores the religious and sociopolitical aspects of kingship rituals in Nepal from their origins in the petty kingdom of Gorkhā in the 16th century to their demise in the early 21st century. Chaulagain focuses on two major rituals: the coronation ritual *Rājyābhiṣeka* and the autumnal festival *Navarātri*. Based on his analysis, Chaulagain argues that these rituals were complex and multifaceted phenomena that involved various actors, agencies, and agendas in the construction and contestation of royal power and identity. He examines how these rituals were influenced by historical and political contexts, such as wars, rebellions, invasions, alliances, reforms, and revolutions, and how they were used strategically and ideologically to justify and enforce the king's authority over his subjects and rivals. In essence, Chaulagain demonstrates

that these rituals were not only religious ceremonies but also political strategies that aimed to legitimize and consolidate royal authority as well as negotiate and accommodate various interests and identities in the kingdom.

In the first part of the book, the author reviews the previous scholarship on Hindu kingship and its rituals. He establishes the theoretical framework as well as the historical background for his analysis, and outlines his sources and methodological approach. Chaulagain rightly points out that "[...] the available research is not focused on the question of the religious and sociopolitical dimensions of power with which these rituals are mainly concerned" (p. 16). Building upon Barbara Holdrege's four dimensions of the phenomenology of power and Maurice Bloch's insights into the sociopolitical dimension of power, Chaulagain claims that "[...] a study of these rituals in the context of Nepalese kingship allows a holistic and historically grounded view" (p. 16). Challenging some of the prevailing assumptions about Hindu kingship and its rituals, Chaulagain argues that Hindu kingship rituals in Nepal were not static or monolithic, but dynamic and diverse, reflecting the historical and political changes in the country over time.

In the second part of the book, Chaulagain analyzes the *Rājyābhiṣeka* and *Navarātri* rituals. He describes in meticulous detail the procedures, symbolism, and meanings of these rituals, as well as their historical evolution and variations. He shows how they were based on sacred myths of divine enthronement and the mythological victory of good over evil – myths that, in fact, served to produce the king's religious and sociopolitical sovereign power. Chaulagain explores how kingship rituals were shaped by and responded to local forms and variations of goddess worship, and how they expressed and contested different aspects of gender, caste, ethnicity, and class. He argues that these devotional activities empowered the king, constructed his personal and corporate identity, and established his

connection and identification with various sources of power.

In the third part of the book, the author analyzes how kingship and sacred space were configured and reconfigured in

relation to changing structures of the “Hindu” state over time and how the state in turn was influenced by and responded to the historical and political changes in the country. Chaulagain traces how the Śāha kings expanded their territory and

influence by incorporating various local cultures and deities into their ritual system. He examines how kingship rituals were used by the kings to assert their divine and sacred status, display their military and economic power, establish their alliances, and patronage networks, and incorporate or appease different social groups and regions. And finally, he explores how the institution of kingship faced multiple challenges from internal dissenters, external invaders, colonial powers, democratic movements, Maoist insurgency, and republican forces, demonstrating that myth and ritual have long been sites for dialogue, resistance, subversion, and the replacement of power. Chaulagain concludes that religion and politics are deeply intertwined in ritual activities; in fact, only in the highly religious and devotional settings can the rituals exert their maximum sociopolitical powers.

The book is a valuable contribution to the fields of Indology, South Asian studies, religious studies, and political history. It sheds light on the complex and dynamic relationship between religion and politics in Nepal and offers a nuanced understanding of Hindu kingship rituals. Chaulagain provides a rich description of various royal rituals and their meanings, based on his firsthand observation and participation as well as his critical reading of primary and secondary sources. He also offers a comprehensive and comparative analysis of the historical evolution and political implications of royal

rituals, showing how they reflected and shaped the sociocultural realities of Nepal over time and, thereby, challenges some of the conventional assumptions and stereotypes about them.

“In essence, Chaulagain demonstrates that these rituals were not only religious ceremonies but also political strategies that aimed to legitimize and consolidate royal authority as well as negotiate and accommodate various interests and identities in the kingdom”.

- Stefan Lueder on *Hindu Kingship Rituals*

However, the book is not without limitations. It contains a lot of dense and complex information, using specific terminology that may be difficult for readers to understand without prior knowledge of Hinduism, Himalayan and Nepali history, or complex theoretical frameworks of ritual studies. To be sure, a scholarly audience will appreciate the book’s arguments and insight, but the broader public may find it too difficult to follow. Beyond that, Chaulagain does not critically examine and contextualize his historical source material. This becomes evident, for example, when he is referencing the *vaṃśāvalī* (chronicles), e.g. the *Gorkhāvāṃśāvalī*, or the so-called *divya upadeś* of Pṛthvīnārāyaṇa Śāha, without properly addressing their disputed authenticity and, thus, accepts these sources at face value without much scrutiny. This insufficiency further plays into the third and major shortcoming of the book: the uncritical reproduction of notions of historical isolationism, exceptionalism, and methodological nationalism which remain largely prevalent in Himalayan and particularly Nepali history. Chaulagain falls short on connecting his valuable insights to broader debates on history, power, and legitimacy beyond the Hindu kingship debate in South Asia that could have made the book more appealing to a broader audience. These shortcomings notwithstanding, the book is a well-researched and well-written monograph that offers fascinating insights into the religious lives of the kings of Nepal and

their ritual practices. It is recommended for scholars, students, and anyone interested in learning more about Hindu kingship rituals, their power relation, and historical evolution in Nepal.

Stefan Lueder is the Managing Editor of *HIMALAYA* and recently completed his PhD in South Asian and Himalayan History at Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany.