



Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 30

Number 1 *Development in Tibet: Land, Labor and
Social Policy in a Context of Rapid Transition No. 1 &
2*

Article 21

October 2011

Wandering with Sadhus: Ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas by Sonda Hausner; Reviewed by Mary Cameron

Mary Cameron
Florida Atlantic University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Cameron, Mary (2011) "Wandering with Sadhus: Ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas by Sonda Hausner; Reviewed by Mary Cameron," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 30: No. 1, Article 21.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol30/iss1/21>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.



WANDERING WITH SADHUS: ASCETICS IN THE HINDU HIMALAYAS

BY SONDRA HAUSNER

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. Cloth. 272 pp., 8 b&w photos. ISBN: 0-253-34983-4.

REVIEWED BY MARY CAMERON

The first thing one notices about Sondra Hausner's sensitively written ethnography, *Wandering with Sadhus: Ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas*, is its remarkable methodology. The second is its sustained focus on time, place, and embodiment as forming a coherent community and culture of renunciators, in contradistinction to the prevalent view of isolated, wandering, unattached individuals. The abundant descriptive, historical, and regional material Hausner presents in her book makes it highly recommended reading for students and scholars of South Asian religions and cultures, and her skill at respectfully bringing the reader into the lives of renunciators without an uncomfortable feeling of voyeurism is commendable. One almost wishes that Hausner had not chosen to make the argument for body-soul dualism her main theoretical point because, while important, its relevance somewhat pales in light of the broader and more significant contribution of the work: namely, demonstrating how Hindu ascetics live and mediate the paradoxes of the mortal and problematic body by way of their daily and seasonal tapas that ultimately attain for them an on-going embodiment of the confluence of space and time. Others before her had theorized as much from religious texts, from other religious figures, or from village and temple ethnographies. But by "walking the walk" for long and sometimes difficult periods, Hausner has uniquely and masterfully synthesized often elusive and abstract concepts into a coherent theory of the intentional community and lived experiences of an original liminal subject.

As the title suggests, the author indeed wandered far, wide, and long in the Himalayas with the sadhus and sadvis that are the subject of her study. The places she traveled to be with the (in)famous Hindu renunciators engaged her attention to their community (yes, they have one, despite "renouncing" the attachments, obligations, and materialism of their own natal families; some are even married) and their bodies (no, not all are naked and most decorate with signs of their deities and ash from their fires) to argue for a religiously-based

symbolic and social dualism at the foundation of Hindu life, as Dumont so thoroughly argued some five decades ago. The three dimensions of sadhu culture (my word; she rarely used it until the last section of the final chapter) that Hausner focuses on are place, time, and body. She examines these three dimensions in the lives of a select group of women and men Saivite followers, but also brings in generalizations from larger patterns that she has identified among several different groups. Groups of sadhus are connected not by the typical fabric of family life but through their identification with gurus and ancient lineages that follow religious practices associated for centuries with the Hindu god Shiva.

Uneducated and more concerned with the body at the daily level, the sadhus that she worked closely with did not engage Hausner in religio-philosophical discussions of the body as illusion and related familiar themes in Hinduism, although when asked they did provide her with clarifications and examples of what it means that the body is both a burden and the instrument for releasing that burden. Rather, she had to follow them and to be receptive to where they wandered and what they experienced; in so doing she discovered the complexities of the community that they indeed "occupy." For the reader, Hausner presents a fresh look at lived Hinduism from an inherently interesting group that lives a paradox of embodiment unparalleled in the anthropological literature.

Chapter Three is an extraordinary discussion of ordinary and cosmological time; here Hausner's methodology of wandering really pays off for the reader. Her participation in the rituals across the northern South Asian landscape provides not only vivid accounts of some of the world's most remarkable—and largest—religious gatherings—but importantly shows how they are enactments of Hindu mythological time. The great significance that sadhus place on being physically present at the ritual sites provides strong evidence for Hausner's argument that the somatic body of the sadhu comes to "embody" universal time and place. Here she is arguing for far more than the body as a symbolic temple, as a source of illusory suffering, or as a product of cultural ideas. Indeed the sadhu body comes, through stages, to bear the extraordinary power rendered in such auspicious sites, and these lifelong activities combined with everyday tapas (as her companions described them) that include family renunciation and physical discomforts, render the sadhu liminally dangerous and powerful *vis a vis* the normal, family Hindu person (a role also highly coveted and valued in South Asian society, it should be noted).

Place, as both developed religious sites and naturally rich and undisturbed forests, rivers and caves, is also well-described and documented in her study; she provides very interesting information about the role and significance of ashrams and fire pits, for example, and how natural beauty is a religious phenomenon. However, a lack of maps to illustrate

the geography of sadhu travel may frustrate the reader unfamiliar with northern South Asian regions who wants to know where these sacred, wondrous places are.

The chapter on the body is the final descriptive chapter, and here Hausner synthesizes her findings on place and time to argue for a dualistic model of embodiment that recognizes two distinct domains of somatic body and non-material soul. Set at Pashupati temple and its grounds in Kathmandu, the chapter focuses mostly on the already familiar theme of the illusion of the body. This material is very interesting though it suffers from a minor weakness of the book, its repetitiveness. Also a focus on two women provides insufficient coverage of this vast topic, and gender is treated in only a cursory manner. Still the strength of writing and the sophisticated analysis provide an understanding of the aging and suffering sadhu body. From life-stages data of what the sadhus say about the body, Hausner interprets their negation and annoyance of their bodies as expressions of paradoxical experiences of illusion—that the body's physicality is an illusion of materiality that they must nonetheless accept. In this final chapter before the conclusion, Hausner revisits body concepts prevalent in South Asian literature that present tapas as mainly extreme austerities, whereas her participants see an alternative kind of tapas that is less extreme. Sadhus live a paradox in that the body is the vehicle by which they can transcend the illusion of material life, but the body is at the same time an embodied reality of dualism. Thus their separation from householder life is permanent yet their daily lives are lived within a body they must continuously experience as suffering from the wandering, non-attached life, but which they also attempt to transcend. The sadhus emphasize how the body is the means by which they reach the sacred places of religious festivals, or the instrument by which they meditate and perform tapas. This paradox is the basis for Hausner to argue that while the goal of the renouncer is transcendence of dualism, sadhus continuously refer to and acknowledge dualism explicitly and implicitly.

The book is thoroughly descriptive, at times becoming repetitious on themes somewhat contradictory to the title's implied meaning—that sadhus are wanderers, when in fact much of the time they stay in one place for often long periods—and not always getting below surface descriptions of the body until much later in the book. On the latter the reader is left wondering about body sadhanas like yoga and the presumed transcendence of suffering entailed in a sadhu's life. Did her participants reflect on this? Some of them were ill and had surgery yet lack of description beyond the stoic "body as illusion" aphorism and some brief descriptions in the final chapters leaves one wondering about the ordinary body and the suffering body—phenomena and experiences so central in cultural and medical anthropological theory on the body. Hausner could have probed her subjects more about their physical pain or their experiences of bliss when performing asanas. What kind of meditation do they practice? Is the body a vehicle of meditation, as in some forms of Buddhist medita-

tion, and if so, what is the technique they use? What is the role of the oft-mentioned marijuana and hashish in relation to the paradox of embodiment? A book that purports to advance our knowledge of body and culture could have pressed these issues more.

Hausner's application of ethnographic methods—observation, participation, interviews—to elicit information about such complex ideas as renunciation, illusion, transcendence, and power as lived experiences produces a groundbreaking study. That these are not tied more persuasively to the large literature on the anthropology of the body—she relies on a few dated religious studies references only, ignoring the work from medical anthropology, for example—makes the study less generalizable than it could have been. Still, the book's strength lies in the fluid way complex religio-philosophical ideas are rendered accessible in the description of the lives and practices of the sadhus.

Mary Cameron is professor of anthropology at Florida Atlantic University.

TIBETAN MODERNITIES: NOTES FROM THE FIELD ON CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE

BY ROBERT BARNETT AND RONALD
SCHWARTZ, EDS.

Leiden: Brill, 2008. xxi, 456 p. : ill., map. ISBN
9789004155220

REVIEWED BY GEOFF CHILDS

Tibetan Modernities contains articles originally presented at the Tenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies held in 2003 in Oxford. Contributors include professional artists and writers as well as representatives of several academic disciplines (e.g., anthropology, ethnomusicology, geography, linguistics, and sociology). Robert Barnett provides a preface that traces the development of modern Tibetan Studies through shifts in research locales (from exile communities to Tibetans living within China) and themes (from Tibetans as victims of oppression to agents of change). Most of the essays in this volume illustrate this thematic switch by portraying Tibetans as contributors if not initiators of many transformations currently sweeping through their societies. Ronald Schwartz's introductory essay then