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Book Review: *Sacred Groves and Local Gods: Religion and Environmentalism in South India*

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Evidently, Duerksen also seeks to draw individual members of the Yesu satsang communities into the folds of his target audience, as (in a somewhat unanticipated term) he concludes with some practical recommendations that are directed specifically at individuals engaged in Yesu satsangs.

Like all scholarship, this book is not perfect. This being said, Duerksen is self-reflective and upfront about the inevitable limitations of his work. In addition to noting some of the limits of his chosen methodological approach (see p. 45

especially), Duerksen concludes the book by acknowledging that his own work can be viewed as a starting point, and recognises that further ethnographic engagement and more scholarly reflection on Yesu satsang communities is needed. Recent scholarly works which also focus on hybrid forms of worship directed at Jesus will find a companion in Duerksen's monograph.

Nadya Pohran
University of Cambridge

***Sacred Groves and Local Gods: Religion and Environmentalism in South India.*
Eliza F.Kent. Oxford University Press, 2013. 236 pages.**

IN sharp contrast to the conventional view that sacred groves are remnants of unaltered, pre-modern and non-dynamic forms of nature worship, Eliza Kent's book explores the religiously produced contemporary meanings of forested shrines in the Tamil-speaking regions in India. While recording non-Brahminic Tamil people's ecological sensibilities, it explores how they are embedded in local beliefs and practices that are not immune to the changes people experience at the intersection of education, development, NGO's sacred grove projects and Hindutva ideology. Its opening pages in the first chapter introduce to the North American readers John Muir's idea of groves in the US as 'God's First Temples' and demonstrates how they are different from the sacred groves in Tamilnadu in that the latter, relatively smaller patches of land, are also 'sites for political expression and the articulation of deeply felt pragmatic need.' (20) While making the western readers see the unknown in the light of the known, the author does not lose sight of the

particularities, nuances, complexities and cultural differences of the phenomenon under study—a superb display of ethnographically well-grounded scholarship in material religion as evidenced in the contents not only of chapter one but also of subsequent chapters in the book. Chapter 1, based on the study of sacred groves in the Madurai region, argues that the currently settled farmers such as Ambalakkarars' and Valaiyars' understanding of sacred groves as deity's domain is an expression of their commitment to fierce deities who evoke two hundred year old communities' memories enacted in their various rituals to keep alive their original communal identity as hunters and warriors.

Chapter 2 takes the readers from the Madurai region to the Tiruvannamalai District. The locals here, especially the present young generation of the tribal people—who having gained access, through road, to the benefits of modern civilization such as education, employment, state-based rural developmental

schemes—are driven by pragmatism and rationalism to embrace an altered vision of the sacred groves. This changed vision among the locals, while revising the old ideas of *theetu* (taboo) and transgression, has not totally overturned old cosmology. It has been rather repositioned and re-inscribed to accommodate the experiences of people's agency not only in favour of their well-being—which endeavours to resist the state policies and schemes that appropriate their forest land for state revenue—but also in support of their inherited religious frameworks and practices which display deference, though in a diminished fashion, to their lineage deities and sacred groves.

Chapter 3, based on four cases studies of sacred groves in the Pondicherry region, throws light on the development of sanskritization that the sacred groves undergo as a result of various factors including their take-over by the state. It also argues that while sanskritization may mean introduction of a pantheon of new deities and proliferation of built structures at the expense of surrounding forested land, it 'may also lead to democratization of access to the groves, making them available to groups long excluded or marginalized from worship in them.' (117) In this regard, the author draws the reader's attention to the fact that religious beliefs about sacred groves increase or decrease depending on the presence or absence of three important factors, namely, community solidarity, nature of worship and the physical size of the groves.

Chapter 4 illustrates not only how Aurovillians' worldview that embraces both the spirit and the matter as integral constituents of one reality motivated them to launch FRLHT-Pitchandikulam environmental project of sacred grove restoration at Puttupattu but also the cultural differences, challenges and setbacks

that they encountered in their neighborhood while implementing their project. While analyzing the situation, the author insightfully comments: "to accomplish anything over the long haul in a complex social nexus such as one finds in Tamil sacred groves, one must be sensitive to the shifting, dynamic and de-centered nature of power relations within which environmental organizations must work to accomplish their goals."(159)

Chapter 5 focuses on the initiatives of a CPREEC (C.P. Ramaswami Environmental Education Centre) to recreate sacred groves in the villages that have over a period of time destroyed the trees and plants around the local shrines. While the organisation has put in place a programme of action that enlists and nurtures local beliefs and practices that sustain sacred groves, it is has taken a controversial evolutionary stance that selectively discards some 'traditional' practices including animal sacrifice. While concurring with the view that this attempt is an imposition of Brahminical ideology on the non-Brahminic phenomenon of sacred groves in Tamil villages, Kent—in the context of invoking various theories of environmentalism to understand this development—builds on Tomalin's typology of 'weak' and 'strong' environmentalism to name CPREEC as 'extra-strong' and shows that this evangelical environmentalist group has almost become an agency of nationalistic Hindutva ideology in the Dravidian heartland of Tamilnadu.

Kent is an excellent story teller who narrates the complex story of Tamil religious environmentalism with fervour and flavour, just as she navigates very skilfully through India's socio-religio-cultural waters with ethnographic depth and theoretical clarity. The greatest

strength of Eliza F. Kents's present work lies in its comprehensiveness, readability and accessibility. While addressing the concerns of Western scholars on religious environmentalism from the framework of sacred groves in south India, the author not only familiarizes the readers with the nuanced and shifting meanings of embodied practices of rural Tamil people but also uses a language that speaks at once to both the audience, the western readers and the local Indians. The academic virtue of the book is that, though it is a

monograph on sacred groves in Tamilnadu, it displays the author's wide sweep of knowledge not only about the practices of sacred groves across Tamilnadu but also about similar works on the same phenomena in different parts of India, and also about current views and debates on the subject by Western scholars, Indian environmentalists, social activists, and Hindu nationalists.

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Briefly Noted:

***God's Other Children: Personal Encounters with Faith, Love, and Holiness in Sacred India.* By Bradley Malkovsky. New York: Harper Collins, 2013, xiii + 289 pp.**

IT is often assumed that when a person converts to a particular religious tradition, interest in other religious paths is necessarily forestalled. After all, why venture forth when one has arrived "home"? Fortunately for us, this stage did not last long for Bradley Malkovsky, associate professor of comparative theology at the University of Notre Dame and long the editor of the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*. Like many seekers of his generation, this convert to Catholicism was drawn to India and to the religions of the Subcontinent. In *God's Other Children*, the scholar wends the reader through his personal encounters with Hindus, Muslims, Christians, as well as Buddhist Vipassanā meditation, Yoga, Indian Catholicism, and, he would say, providentially, his future wife. One is reminded of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's maxim that there are no abstract Buddhisms, Islams, and Hindus, but living,

breathing Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus. The humanist, personalist nature of this insight is manifest in this poignant and timely spiritual autobiography. What is it to be an adherent vulnerable to the veracity of other religions, to beliefs and practices not one's own? If God in Christ is "already present" in the religions, what are Christians called to in a pluralist world? How does a post-Vatican II Catholic (and others, by extension) remain faithful to his own tradition while learning from others? It can be argued that the answers lie not in abstraction but in time and space, in a particular human life and between particular people in concrete situations. Of course, the reader may not arrive at this author's answers, or even accept some of his theological premises, but one cannot help but respect the seriousness with which he engages the quest. One is reminded of Klaus Klostermeier's *Christian and Hindu in Vrindavan*