

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

Psychology Faculty Works

Psychology

---

8-1-1994

### Review Of "The Analyst And The Mystic: Psychoanalytic Reflections On Religion And Mysticism" By S. Kakar

Jeanne Marecek

*Swarthmore College*, [jmarece1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:jmarece1@swarthmore.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-psychology>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

---

#### Recommended Citation

Jeanne Marecek. (1994). "Review Of "The Analyst And The Mystic: Psychoanalytic Reflections On Religion And Mysticism" By S. Kakar". *Journal Of Asian Studies*. Volume 53, Issue 3. 971-972. DOI: 10.2307/2059788

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-psychology/285>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Psychology Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

*The Analyst and the Mystic: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Religion and Mysticism.* By SUDHIR KAKAR. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991. xi, 83 pp.

This brief book consists of three loosely related essays concerned with religion, mysticism, healing, and psychoanalytic thought.

The centerpiece of the book is a lengthy chapter on Sri Ramakrishna, a nineteenth-century Hindu mystic. Ramakrishna is an apt subject for a revisionist psychoanalysis of ecstatic religious experience. His experiences (as recounted by Romain Rolland) figured prominently in Freud's assessment of mystical experience as no more than a regression to early infancy, a period when babies have not yet demarcated the self from the external world. In contrast, Sudhir Kakar offers a sympathetic reading of Ramakrishna's religious experience, and he uses this material as an occasion for an interrogation of the categories of mental life found in both Hindu psychology and psychodynamic psychology. Kakar also departs from psychoanalytic orthodoxy by placing Ramakrishna's life within the interpretive framework of Hindu myth and tradition, and in the social context of late nineteenth-century Bengal. The result is a rich, complex, and multi-layered account that stands apart from the reductionism and pathologizing that mar orthodox psychoanalytic accounts of religious phenomena.

The second section concerns the role of the guru in Hindu spiritual practice. Juxtaposing the guru-disciple relationship with the analyst-patient relationship. Kakar explores the overlapping range of emotional experiences they invoke, as well as their differences. Of special interest is his exploration of the psychic perils consequent to the guru's position, and the powers and dangers of the guru's role. Like psychotherapists, gurus can all too easily slide into exploitation, sexual abuse, and omnipotent grandiosity.

In the third chapter, Kakar stands back from the interrogation of Hindu spiritual life to reflect briefly on the vicissitudes of psychoanalytic thinking since Freud. Many early analysts accepted without question Freud's antipathy to religion, an antipathy in keeping with the prevailing ideology of rationalism and positivism. Later psychoanalytic thinkers acknowledged the possibility of "mature" religious experiences, but focused their attention upon "neurotic," "authoritarian," or "infantile" ones. (Non-Western traditions and practices were often included in the last category.) Time is now ripe for psychoanalysts to re-envision religious experience: psychoanalysis is now acknowledged to be a hermeneutic practice rather than a scientific one; moreover, there are available new interpretive resources—such as work on the early mother-infant relationship and on relational models of mental life.

Kakar's earlier works viewed Indian identity and relationships through the lens of psychoanalysis, a stance that some criticized as "psychoanalytic imperialism." *The Analyst and the Mystic* marks a shift away from that stance. Here, the author uses Indian mental life to comment on psychoanalysis, much as he uses psychoanalysis to interrogate Indian life. For example, the account of healing interactions (chapter 2) interweaves psychodynamic constructs, such as transference, countertransference, and parental projection, with those of *darshan*, surrender, and intimate physicality.

Kakar, who practices psychoanalysis in Delhi and also is a visiting professor in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, is uniquely qualified to undertake this project. The book demonstrates his command of the intricacies of the first hundred years of psychodynamic thought. Its prose is elegant and precise, making the book an aesthetic treat as well as an intellectual one. This is a book intended

for scholars interested in the psychology of religion, and for psychoanalysts, but specialists in South Asian studies also will, no doubt, find it of interest.

JEANNE MARECEK  
Swarthmore College

*Towards a New Formation: South Indian Society Under Vijayanagar Rule.* By NOBORU KARASHIMA. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992. xii, 294 pp. \$19.95.

Noboru Karashima has been examining the inscriptions of South India for over thirty-five years, and during that time he has contributed significantly to the understanding of its early history. In this book he expands on his previous volume, *South Indian History and Society: Studies from Inscriptions A.D. 850–1800* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), which dealt primarily with materials from the Chola period (850–1279) in Tamil Nadu. Now he has moved forward in time to the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, still dealing primarily with Tamil inscriptions, but discussing the Vijayanagara empire that spanned all of South India. The volume consists of twelve chapters, eight of which have previously appeared as articles but here are revised and in several cases greatly expanded. The book is therefore an update of Karashima's efforts during the last ten years, and when paired with the earlier book stands as a milestone in his career.

Anyone who wants to understand the history of Vijayanagara should consult this book for its clear presentation of the inscriptional sources and their applications for historical inquiry. Most of the chapters start with a short introduction of relevant source material, then list the contents of relevant inscriptions, and finally discuss the salient points appearing in the records. This is not light reading for the nonspecialist. The author is quite clear (pp. 4–5) on the rationale for his empirical, sometimes mechanical approach: the necessity to return to basics, to understand what the original inscriptions have to say within controlled parameters of time and space, before making generalizations.

The first half of this work deals with problems of state formation by studying the behaviors of the military/political leaders called *nayakas* and other influential persons bearing high honorific titles. Karashima is able to demonstrate differences in the organization of power between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. During the earlier period, agents responsible to the Vijayanagara kings interacted regularly with local notables (*nāttār*) in the Tamil country. In the later period, the empire moved toward a more "feudal" model, as *nāyakas* received revenue grants from the kings that led to greater local autonomy and eventually the development of independent states. During the sixteenth century the inscriptions yield fewer references to the *nāttār* as well, suggesting that local leaders became increasingly excluded from public affairs as *nāyakas* penetrated more effectively into local issues. None of these findings is new, but never before have they so clearly emerged from the original sources.

One-third of the book (pp. 181–263) presents an exhaustive survey of tax and revenue terms found in the Tamil inscriptions from 1300 to 1650. Most of these pages consist of tables showing total numbers of references to the different terms broken down into seven chronological periods and into significant categories, a concordance of the terms, and a chronological list of source inscriptions. This section is an interim report on the activities of a team that is studying Vijayanagara revenue