

BOOK REVIEW

KARÁSEK, MATEJ – SOUČEK, IVAN (eds.). *Indické cesty do duchovného sveta* [Indian Journeys to the Spiritual World]. Bratislava: CAD PRESS, 2016, 136 pp. ISBN 978-80-88969-73-0.

This publication was written by four authors: the historian and philosopher Dušan Deák, who has a long-term interest in the religions of South Asia, the ethnologist Matej Karásek, the anthropologist Ivan Souček, and the student of ethics and religions Tomáš Avramov. The central theme of the publication is an initiation ritual called *diksa* from the environment of Indian sadhus, Christian sannyasins, and modern Indian saints. This ritual has been the focus of all authors except Deák, whose introductory chapter *How to Understand Religious Groups in India* (pp. 11–29) is supposed to introduce the reader into the complicated concept of Indian religiosity. Deák deals mainly with the religion that is commonly referred to as Hinduism and demonstrates that the complexity he mentions is evident in the content and forms of this religion. He points to several aspects which cause problems with its characterisation, such as the mixing of the concept of collective identity, which is offered by many Brahmanical sources, with individual religiosity, which does not have to be completely in accordance with these sources. Years of research and study confirmed his conviction that any description of diverse expressions of Indian religious life must rely on Indian materials and hold on to the structure of the religious space in India. He explains how the religious ideas and practices of individuals can be influenced by their position in the hierarchy of Indian society (the role of family, *jati*), or by the domestic or local tradition, which can result in their leaning towards the teaching of a particular spiritual teacher (*guru*) and their incorporation into a particular religious system, *sampradaya*. According to Deák, the study of sampradayas can help researchers to learn and understand the real religious life of Indians. That is the reason why he dedicates a large part of his text to their description. He is of course aware of the diversity of sampradayas and the large number of problems involved in their study, such as the problem of their classification according to worshipped divinities and the question of their origin or their localisation. He points to the fact that sampradayas lend a specific character to a region, and their popularity is connected with local tradition. His attention is also focused on the political aspect of sampradayas. He ascribes importance to the lay dimension of sampradayas, which not only facilitates the understanding of their impact in a wider spatial context, but also points to interaction between representatives of sampradayas and ordinary Hindus. His reflections on the forms and roles of sampradayas are suitably illustrated by an example of a community of seasonal pilgrims – Varkari sampraday in Maharashtra.

The core of the next chapter, which is entitled *Holy Men of India – Between Ideal and Reality* (pp. 30–57) and which was written by Ivan Souček, is a presentation of the results of the author's field research among members of shivite and vaishnavite traditions in Tamil Nadu in 2014 and 2016. By means of informal and unstructured

interviews with sadhus, he sought to understand the position and life of ascetics in contemporary Indian society and confront his findings with facts and data from numerous publications on Indian asceticism. The author assumes that his work will not be read only by Indologists or experts on Indian asceticism; therefore, before introducing the methodology, course, and the results of his research, he offers basic information about the past of Indian ascetics. He describes how people become ascetics and how they live, referring to Indian texts (especially to later Upanishads) and their interpretations by historians of Indian religiosity (especially P. Olivelle). Since one of his aims is to focus on the initiation ritual (diksa) among Indian sadhus, he also explains this notion. His categorisation of rituals is based mainly on M. Eliade. The core of Souček's study focuses on his anthropological research. Those who wander with sadhus are headed to significant places of pilgrimage in South India: Tiruvannamalai, Rameshvaram, and Kanyakumari. Meetings with wandering sadhus enable Souček to gradually obtain answers to his research questions as well as an overall picture of Indian asceticism at present. His interviews with sadhus are conveniently accompanied by explanatory parentheses in which the author explains to the lay readership some phenomena referred to in the interviews, for example, the significance of a Brahmanic cord, attitudes to death and funeral rituals, and the question of accepting gifts. The author's other parentheses bring information about the outer features which are typical of Indian sadhus, their division into communities, and the reasons why young people today become sadhus. Thanks to the interviews transcribed in direct speech, helpful explanatory parentheses, and refreshing notes from field research, the reader obtains a plastic picture of contemporary Indian sadhus' attitudes to different aspects of Indian asceticism and the environment in which they move about. In conclusion, the author summarises some facts which he considers important for the understanding of contemporary Indian asceticism: negative attitudes to the values of the majority society, preservation of some attributes of the former social standing in a new environment (Brahmanic cord), and the formation of structured groups (the central position of the group's older members). He points out the problem with defining Indian asceticism, which may be connected with the wrong delineation of the relationship between a normative and a lived religion in India. Like Deák in the previous chapter, Souček comes to the conclusion that "for further study of the Indian religious world, it is therefore more beneficial to focus on the individual narratives of Indian men and women who adhere to an ascetic way of life than to look for a universal definition of the relationship between an ascetic way of life and a normative society" (p. 57).

In his chapter entitled *Hindu Ways to Christ* (pp. 58–84), Karásek focuses on Christian sannyasins in India. He draws on rich literature on this topic and on the field research that he conducted in 2014 and 2016 in the monasteries Kurishumala and Shantivanam in Kerala. He introduces the reader to the topic by explaining the origin of Indian Christianity, its development, and how it has, in many respects, adjusted to the surrounding Hindu world throughout history. He focuses his attention on the important role that Portuguese missionaries and especially the encounter of the East and the West during the British colonial rule played in the formation of Christianity in India. He illustrates the encounters between Hinduism and Christianity by the example of Bhawani Charan Banerjee, who interpreted the Catholic doctrine of the Holy Trinity in

the spirit of advaita and whose religious identity reflects the merger of selected elements of Hinduism and Christianity. He refers to him as the father of Christian sannyas and the movement of Christian ashrams, which is the focus of his text. He puts the activities of the founders of Christian monasteries in India (J. Moanchanin and H. Le Saux, who established Shantivanam, and F. Mahieu and B. Griffith, who founded Kurishumala) in the wider context of the changing attitudes of many members of the Catholic church to non-Christian religions, which were evident during the second Vatican council in 1962 – 1965. According to Karásek, the movement of Christian ashrams, which draws on the philosophy of advaita, balances on the boundary between Christianity and Hinduism. He supports his claim by presenting the Indian Christian liturgy Bharatiya puja, which he saw in the monastery Kurishumala and which contains a lot of Hindu elements. He then deals with the diksa ritual, which was incorporated in the practices of Christian sannyasins at the time when Kurishumala and Shantivanam were founded. He comes to the conclusion that Christian sannyasins borrowed the initiation ritual from Hindu tradition, but refuse to join the historical ranks of Hindu gurus and disciples. He claims that Christ becomes their guru in most cases. After that, he focuses his attention on several kinds of diksa in Kurishumala and Shantivanam. In the conclusion (p. 84), he voices several ideas: “Religion is not by far as simple as many like to imagine it.” “Each religion is a living organism composed of different kinds of cells which can connect and just as well compete with the cells of other organisms.” “From time to time it is not at all easy to find out where one religion ends and another begins. It is true that in some places the boundary between two religions is strictly guarded and difficult to cross, but at the same time there are a lot of places which are not separated by any boundary.” There are transitions between them “where both religions overlap and where it is very difficult to search for the religious identity of those who are in this in-between position”.

The last chapter entitled *Phenomenon of “Non-formal” Initiation and Its Meaning for Spiritual Tradition* (pp. 85–101) was written by Tomáš Avramov. In the introduction he explains some terms used in the text. He focuses especially on the central term “diksa”, and he characterises it, drawing on several texts and dictionaries. He defines diksa, or initiation, as “a process during which the initiated acquires broadened horizons of consciousness and knowledge and extraordinary skills” and states that “the presence of a qualified teacher and a dedicated student are essential for diksa” (p. 85). He points out that different schools lay emphasis on different aspects of the initiation, which results in different categories and a different number of diksas. From the viewpoint of his study, it is important to know that diksa can have both a formal and non-formal character. Non-formal diksa takes place without an external ritual or arbitrarily modifies it. According to Avramov, the effect of the non-formal diksa on a student can be much stronger due to its non-formal character. He explains the non-formal diksa on the Indian soil by presenting examples of modern Indian saints Ramana Maharishi and Nitya Caitanya Yati and the spiritual experience of the English traveller and writer P. Brunton. He also describes the diksa that Svami Muktananda underwent under the guidance of his guru Bhagvan Nityananda, Ram Dass under the guidance of his guru Neem Karoli Baba, and he also deals with the self-initiation of the Bengali saint Anandamayi Ma.

In conclusion, it may be stated that the present publication conveniently combines a scholarly and a popularising approach. It is the result of thorough study of scholarly literature, to which the authors refer to in their numerous footnotes and entries in the register, as well as the result of their field researches in India. The popularising effort of the authors can be seen in the attractive language of the texts, which is sometimes enriched with dialogues, explanatory parentheses, notes from the field researches, as well as in the glossary of terms and the appendix of figures which illustrate the texts. By presenting an aspect of the diverse religious life in India, the publication is a contribution to the knowledge of some specific aspects of Indian religiosity and to some extent fills the gap in Slovak scholarly literature. The only thing that negatively affects the good impression of the present publication is the insufficient language editing in some parts of its text.

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