

GUY L. BECK (ed.), *Alternative Krishnas. Regional and Vernacular Variations on a Hindu Deity*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005, pp. xvi+217. ISBN 0-7914-6415-6 (HB)

The volume *Alternative Krishnas* is dedicated to the living Vaishnava tradition relating to the god Krishna (Kṛṣṇa) and contains essays of nine American scholars. Definitely its very title catches a reader's attention (intended?). In the introduction Guy L. Beck, the editor, while explaining the term 'alternative Krishnas' states that 'besides alleged normative Krishna, there are several other types of Krishnas that have flourished in different parts of India among ethnic groups and sectarian divisions. As a collection of essays describing "alternative Krishnas", this book is an attempt to supply some more elusive yet compelling missing pieces to the complete jigsaw puzzle of "Krishna"' (p. 2). The effort of the authors is mostly welcome. One should be aware, however, that for those whose religious tradition is under more or less meticulous research, Krishna is one, in the form known to them and worshiped in their own way. Perhaps it would have been more appropriate to simply introduce the expression 'alternate views of Krishna [and his worship]'. Describing and analysing the religious cult in its manifold dimensions, one should remember that it is invented by humans, not the divine, for their own sake. Thus Krishna always maintains his real form (*svarūpa*) among his numerous devotees coming from various strata of society, and they perceive him in the form (*rūpa*) familiar to them and according to their expectations grounded in their own experience of the divine. Mainstream and non-mainstream traditions of Vaishnavism (Krishnaism) are complementary in their existence.

Regional and vernacular variations on Krishna bhakti presented in the volume cover mostly North India (Maharashtra, a region of Braj and Benares, or Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal) with a short sojourn to South India, more precisely, Tamilnadu. The two opening papers of Glen Alexander Hayes and June McDaniel are dedicated to religious traditions in West Bengal, respectively Vaishnava Sahajiyā and folk Vaishnavism. Hayes discusses alternative views of Krishna and Rādhā of the Sahajiyās, referring to a contemporary (Western) metaphor theory finding it 'quite useful in evaluating the potency of conceptual metaphor in religious texts' (p. 21). Concentrating on extolling the theory as such, he unfortunately does not leave enough space for examining the various texts of the Sahajiyās. Applying the Indian aesthetic theory of *rasa*, only mentioned, could have given an interesting conceptual metaphoric view of the matter as well. McDaniels focuses on the village cult of Krishna statues, opposing it to Gauḍīya Vaishnavism (pp. 34–6), an orthodox tradition of that region. It is rather obvious, though, that a devotee of any origin and affiliation in daily worship does not consider any theoretical reflection except his/her own understanding of the

divine. After all, the worship of images was also introduced by Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, just to mention two followers of Caitanya—Narahari Śarkar, and Vaṁsidās. The cult of village statues (*ṭhākurs*) of Krishna is a part of the widespread mode of praising the deity in a material shape of the solid *mūrti*. Should we agree with the author's final statement: 'this alternative or folk Krishna has humbled himself as a prisoner within matter' (p. 40)?

Titling her paper 'Domesticating Krishna ...' Tracy Pintchman refers to a women's ritual tradition in Benares and juxtaposes the puranic and the folk. The female devotional practice is pictured in regard to Krishna's wedding to the plant Tulsi in the elaborated *pūjā* in Kārtik month (October/November). Then we move to Braj, the home country of Krishna. The chapter 'Krishna as Loving Husband of God...' by Guy L. Beck presents the Rādhāvallabha Sampradāya founded by Śrī Harivaṁśa (16th century), one of the most important Vaiṣṇava sects in Vrindavana, founded by Śrī Harivaṁśa (16th century). The Sampradāya established the supreme status of Rādhā, which the author discusses by considering different Vaiṣṇava traditions. Rādhā was placed over and above Krishna, definitely her husband. Thus two passionate lovers of the *Gītagovinda* by Jayadeva (12th century) became eternally married wife and husband. The appendix to the chapter is worth mentioning since it contains a translation of two hymns composed in Braj Bhāṣa (a transcription of the original text would have been appreciated). They describe the wedding of Rādhā and Krishna (pp. 86–90) and come from the Sampradāya's hymnal that is still a part of ritual practice. A. Whitney Sanford writes about Balarāma (Daūjī), a faithful companion of his brother Krishna, but rarely worshipped separately. She concentrates on the religious practice of the Daūjī Temple (Uttar Pradesh) where Balarāma is given a central position in the cult. The textual sources for Balarāma and his Holī festival are brought into attention and informatively presented. Christian Lee Novetzke gives an account entitled 'A Family Affair...', or Krishna in Paṇḍharpūr (Maharashtra), taking 'the theme of family values and domestic issues as a defining character of early Marāṭhī devotional literature' (p. 114). He focuses on the *Tīrthāvalī* (*The Garland of Sacred Places*) text of the Vārkarī tradition and worship of Krishna as Viṭṭhal.

The Krishna-lore in the south is represented by an essay of Anne E. Monius, who dedicates it to 'Krishna in the Non-Hindu Literature of Early Medieval South India' (p. 139). The author refers to two Tamil narrative poems, *Cilappatikāram* and *Maṇimēkalai*, the author of the former perhaps belonging to the Jaina tradition and of the latter to the Buddhist one. The passages from them describing Krishna's dance (*kuravai*) and mentioning Balarāma and Piññai (Rādhā) are questioned, but there is no clear answer (pp. 146–7). It should be remembered that both poems are associated with the Hindu tradition as well (*vide* deification of Kaṇṇaki), so why call them,

without any comment, non-Hindu literature? The essay of Jerome H. Bauer discusses the figure of Krishna in Jaina cosmohistory, where he is considered an archetypal Jaina layman on the one hand and an Illustrious Person—*Śalākāpuruṣa* (p. 151)—on the other one. The Jaina Krishna stories called *Harivaṁśa Purāṇas* are found both in the Śvetāmbara and Digambara canons. The author consults some of them to reflect upon the problem of an ‘alternative tradition’, ‘countertradition’, or ‘parallel tradition’ of the Jaina Krishna (p. 165). The last chapter of the volume, by Valerie Ritter, deals with the epic poem *Priyapravās (The Sojourn of the Beloved)* by Hariaudh, a Braj Bhāṣa poet of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The poet remodels the carnal relationship of Rādhā and Krishna into modern social phenomenon voiced in his work.

The whole volume offers a considerable spectrum of various lesser-known forms of Krishna bhakti presented from different research perspectives. It is an informative addition to studies in broadly conceived Vaishnavism and religious traditions as such.

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