

Review of Deonnie Moodie, *The Making of a Modern Temple and a Hindu City: Kalighat and Kolkata* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

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In *The Making of a Modern Temple and a Hindu City*, Deonnie Moodie explores the journal's inaugural theme, 'Religious Life', through a study of Kālīghāṭ, a famous Hindu temple in Kolkata, West Bengal. Located in the city's southern district, Kālīghāṭ is a bustling pilgrimage site where the goddess, Kālī, is worshipped by Hindu devotees from various backgrounds through ritual obeisance and goat sacrifice. By combining historical and ethnographic sources in interdisciplinary unison, Moodie illustrates how religious life at Kālīghāṭ is not diminishing but is attuning to the modern metropolis.

In this impressive work, Moodie tracks the ways Kālīghāṭ – redefined as 'public space' by the courts – is being modernized via renovations in its infrastructure, cleanliness, and practices. At the turn of Indian Independence, these changes were effectuated by Kolkata's elite (known then as the *bhadralok*) during several legal cases. To this day, such temple reforms are set in motion by middle-class organizations, mainly NGOs, who insist their plans benefit the common good. As such, at Kālī's shrine the goddess's authority has become subsidiary to appeasing the devout collective who gather there. Moodie writes, 'Gone are the concerns for purity and the goddess'[s] efficacy. They are replaced by ideas about what the modern Indian cities ought to look and feel like' (20). In this contemporary city, it seems Hindu religiosity, typified by Kālīghāṭ, is not excluded from broader social changes but is, rather, intrinsic to them. The author also cites two informants who oppose gentrification at Kālīghāṭ, a Brahmin priest (*sevāyēt*) and a subaltern beggar, which augments the overall picture she presents. Like a stereoscope, then, Moodie shows how a Hindu temple is a locus of hegemony *and* resistance, all at once.

Overall, the book's structure – meticulously constructed – is arranged in chronological order, moving from colonial Calcutta to 21st-century Kolkata. Chapter 1 begins in colonial Calcutta, where



Moodie traces four Bengali authors who reshaped the city's history to re-claim Kālīghāṭ as its cornerstone, contra colonial ones that decried its presence there. Chapters 2-4 expand upon the first, charting the court cases, bourgeois projects, and defiant responses that mobilized the temple's revisioning in the present.

To begin, Chapter 1 considers the work of four historians, Bysack, Caṭṭopādhyāy, Datta, and Ray, whose accounts were blueprints for processes of modernization that occurred later. For them, Kālīghāṭ was not irrelevant, as the colonists thought, but a significant part of West Bengali life; above all, its foundations lay at the centre of *kālīkṣetra* (literally, 'the land of Kālī') (51). To challenge colonial histories, the authors adopted scientific methods of their own, geological surveys, Sanskrit texts, and, in some cases, genealogies, in order to corroborate the site's centrality since antiquity. And, as an embodiment of the new nation, Kālīghāṭ's religiosity was also reframed; in these texts, Tantric forms of goddess-worship (involving blood sacrifice) were glossed over to spotlight Vedic and Vaiṣṇava ones. On that point, the reviewer wonders why Hindu sub-sects are elucidated only in passing by Moodie; a synopsis of each sect, Vedic, Tantric, Vaiṣṇava, and how each applies to the Goddess may have clarified her hypothesis further. In addition, a glossary of Sanskrit and Bengali terms would have assisted in this endeavour.

Next, Moodie brings us to Independent India, with a discussion of the judicial proceedings that facilitated Kālīghāṭ's new 'public' status. Prior to this, Kālīghāṭ was a private bequest maintained by Brahmin *sevāyets* and their families. To justify this change, the judges utilized evidence from many sources, including the authors mentioned in Chapter 1. During these lawsuits, Brahmin priests were castigated as 'corrupt' owners who accrued temple donations for their own ends (79). In response, the judges, themselves middle class, dismantled Brahmin ownership to install new temple committees comprised of Kolkata's educated citizens. As per this legislation, the committees were to manage the site's finances in a way that adhered to its new public image, that is, for 'charity and religious propagation' (72). Here, the depth of Moodie's discussion vis-à-vis temple litigation is innovative.

Meanwhile, Chapters 3-4 delve into the modernizing projects themselves, describing how NGOs, through Public Interest Litigation, work to 'clean' this 'heritage site' (as they put it), alongside the groups who rebel against them (99). In these chapters, the ethnographic tone of Moodie's descriptions is illuminating, especially when she describes the ways hawkers defy state officials *en masse* via hawkers' unions and how priests subvert state injunctions by delaying their orders. Most notably, the author's use of fieldwork material, including interactions with her informants, adds an experiential perspective from worshippers themselves.

Though I admire the author's erudition throughout, I disagree with one theoretical point set out early in the text. For Moodie, Kolkata's middle classes, as 'representatives of the public', are gentrifying Kālīghāṭ temple by 'deploy[ing] modernist idioms, including rationality, democracy, order, and cleanliness [that] stand in stark contrast to idioms [of] pre-modernity – purity, divine

power, and the valor of aristocratic lineages' (3). Here, a disjuncture is expressed between pre-modern and modern values, which is a viable position. Yet I remain unconvinced by Moodie's dichotomy for two reasons: firstly, she assumes that pre-modern values at Kālīghāṭ are *sui generis* superseded by modern ones. In North India, where Kālīghāṭ is located, it could be argued that traditional norms and idioms do not dissipate altogether. Rather, value-systems become *modified* by modernity, such that norms of ritual purity morph into a concern for temple cleanliness. Hence, to my second reason: a traditional-modernist dyad, thereby, presents a polarity seemingly at odds; Moodie notes how middle-class activists posit a return to Vedic-aligned religiosity, whilst also seeking litigation to renew temple management. In my view, her bifurcation does not encapsulate, theoretically, the in-between complexities that operate on the ground in Hindu ideology and practice. In this regard, a certain Clifford Geertzian analysis immediately comes to mind: 'Religion is sociologically interesting not because ... it describes the social order ... but because, like environment [and] political power ... it shapes it'.¹ In the North Indian context, socio-political processes tend to intersect with religious life *and vice versa*.

All that said, however, Moodie's unique methodology and scope is truly commendable. As a result, her book contains considerable insights about Hindu temples in contemporary India, which will provide essential reading for those studying them.

¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1973), 119.