

*Hindu Polytheism*. ALAIN DANJÉLOU. (Bollingen Series LXXIII.) New York: Pantheon Books, 1964. xxxi, 537 pp., appendix, bibliography, charts and diagrams, index, 32 plates, 7 text figures. \$8.50.

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This volume, as the author unostentatiously states at the inception of his foreword "is a mere attempt at explaining the significance of the most prominent Hindu deities in the way in which they are envisaged by the Hindus themselves." However, what could have been a mere annotated list of deities in the hands of some, has become a classic in the hands of Daniélou.

In the section entitled Philosophy, Daniélou explains the theory of Polytheism, the nature of the Ultimate, and the Cosmic Sacrifice. To anthropologists of the West nurtured with the concept that monotheism is *ipso facto* superior to polytheism, the first section of this book should make provocative reading. In his attempt to clarify polytheism Daniélou starts out by explaining the use of symbolism for representing various divine aspects. The conception of the Hindu pantheon and its iconographical theory are based upon the assumption that each divine aspect can be differentially symbolically represented and that all of them are equivalent. The representations can vary from a mental image, a geometrical diagram (*yantra*), an anthropomorphic image (*mūrti*), to a spoken formula (*mantra*). The actual total representation of the Transcendent is beyond our means of knowledge. Only a near approach is possible. The philosophy behind polytheism is based on a multiplicity of approaches to draw a sort of outline of Transcendent Reality, in much the same way as a sculpture must be observed from various angles to appreciate fully all its contours.

In clarifying the nature of polytheism, Daniélou compares it with monotheism, where even though God (in the singular) is sought, in actual practice individuals worship a particularized form of their god, and not his causal, unmanifest, formless aspect. Even though a polytheistic Hindu may worship a personal deity (*iṣṭa—devatā*) he is conscious of other deities as powers springing from an unknowable immensity.

Anthropologists who have worked in India will be aware of the fluid nature of Hindu polytheism. A devout Hindu, even though accepting the essential divinity of all gods and goddesses, will nevertheless express his devotions to the Ultimate Power through one particular aspect. Similarly a whole group, or village, or even locality will worship one deity in preference to all others. These preferences are clearly discernable and can be observed even up to the major regional levels. Kali, consort of Śiva, is a familiar goddess in Bengal but is rarely observed in the Panjab. While going through this work it must be borne in mind that the descriptions given by the author are as

they should be, according to various scriptures and texts. The anthropologist will encounter local variations that are practically infinite in their variety.

As has occurred in other religions, too, involvement in elaborate ritual makes it easy for most Hindus to avoid an intellectual understanding of their faith. How complicated this ritual is, is mentioned in the last sector of the book. The anthropologist working in India soon becomes aware of the great distance between the rarified atmosphere of the philosophy of Hindu polytheism, and the mass of complicated ritual ignorantly practiced below.

The physical aspects of this book and its various arrangements are beyond reproach. The style is lucid; the lack of polemic is particularly attractive. The total result is a volume that is a pleasure to behold and an invigorating experience to read.

Anthropologists interested in any aspect of India can hardly fail to ignore this decisive work on its religion, particularly since the Hindu religion is woven into every facet of life.