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Saivism in the Diaspora: Contemporary Forms of Skanda Worship, by Ron Geaves

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Saivism in the Diaspora: Contemporary Forms of Skanda Worship. By Ron Geaves. London: Equinox Press, 2007. viii + 312 pages. \$100.00 cloth.

This vast study provides an anthropological analysis of the worship of Skanda, one the sons of Siva, as found in the Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, London, and Wales. By providing thick description and employing some of the categories used by anthropologists thirty or more years ago (“big and little traditions” and Sanskritization), Geaves shows how little relevance these ideas hold in the contemporary, globalized era, and suggests that the simultaneous rise of de-regionalized and regionalized forms of Hinduism that have cross-cultural and intergenerational appeal defies the tidiness of these now old-fashioned styles of analysis.

By examining living worship communities, Geaves advances our knowledge of how the worship of Skanda, also known as Murugan, finds diverse expression among Punjabis, Tamilians, Gujaratis, and British adherents to New Age syncretism. He also probes the religious movements’ surrounding charismatic figures, most notably Baba Balaknath (a local deity transported from the Punjab to the U.K.) and Guru Subramaniam, who established a major pilgrimage site on the British Isles in 1974.

This ambitious project, given its vast scope, would have benefitted from the inclusion of maps, photographs and timelines, without which the reader is sometimes left a bit confused. Additionally, by restricting himself to the data collected onsite and secondary anthropological analysis, Geaves does not allow for a full exposition of the textual or theological underpinnings of these complex traditions. One yearns for the depth of analysis found in James J. Preston’s *Cult of the Goddess* (Vikas, 1980), a masterpiece of melding traditional explanations with live interviews and observations. Nonetheless, scholars of the Saiva tradition and observers of Hinduism in diaspora will learn much from this book, which thankfully includes a comprehensive bibliography and index. Recommended for all university libraries.

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