

BOOK REVIEWS

Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon

Himalayan Foothill Folktales

Kirin Narayan, in collaboration with Urmila Devi Sood

NEW YORK, OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1997
336 PAGES

Teachers of Indian Studies in grades 11 through undergraduate will do well to look closely at this book. It offers accessible riches for the curious, peer-oriented student as well as for more academic readers. The author worked closely with her Himalayan Kangra story teller, Urmila, to gain insight into her ideas and interpretations. Thus, she has warmed her study with the flavors of personal contact—between herself and Urmila, and also between Urmila, her extended family, and the broader group of high caste women neighbors and associates in the village. Urmila presented the view of tale-telling as social action. For her, the ultimate motive for the telling and remembering of tales was the formation, recollection, and support of human relationships.

Because both author and primary storyteller are women, the emphasis is predominantly on women's tales and through the telling of such tales, on women as social and moral actors in their Kangra world. The book consists of twenty-one tales, arranged in two sections: tales based on women's rituals performed for the benefit of husband and family; and winter's tales, told round a roaring fire on chilly nights during the wheat growing season. The winter's tales are usefully organized into two thematic divisions: tales of destiny and rebirth; and tales of treachery, separation, and reunion. There is an Afterword, Notes, and a Bibliography, but (unfortunately) no index.

Stories with charming titles—"The Frog Groom," "The Dog Girl," "Love Like Salt," or "The Astrologer's Treachery" will surely attract student attention. The centrality of husbands and fathers, the crucialness of sons, the rivalry of co-wives and sisters-in-law, the blessing or cursedness of a mother-in-law or stepmother and weird magical transformations are story elements which can seduce the reader into deeper cultural insights.

Courses or units on cross-cultural studies of women will find this work rewarding, but if the class includes male students, the latter may feel somewhat left out. Because in South Asian societies and cultures women and men often exist in separate spheres of social and moral action, ethnological research from South Asia tends to reflect these gender divisions. If instructors wish to appeal to male students more effectively in a course using the work under review, they should consider pairing it with Narayan's other prodigious folklore study, *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels* (1989). This book is about the personal, philosophical, and moral discourses between a male Hindu guru, Swamiji, and his disciples. Narayan's parents were followers of Swamiji, so the author had close contact with him and opportunities for intensive observation and discussions. Swamiji was a master story spinner, but more importantly for students of Asian Studies, he was not merely an entertainer. His style of story telling was embedded in the context of his followers' moral or psychological conundrums. Combining both of these works in one course would afford students opportunities for engaging the material from multiple viewpoints.

Narayan recognizes that most tale collections tend to be simply narratives, and that this mode of presentation is justified as a form of literary pleasure, but she prefers to build the personal experience of herself and of her respondents into the ethnography as a measure of the fullness and integrity of the work. With access to Narayan's storytellers as individual people, and not just ethnographic role players, American students will be better equipped to understand such often discomfiting concepts as caste or other cultural and gender hierarchies. Moreover, they might begin more easily to appreciate and enjoy the psychological and philosophical wisdom available from the study of another culture.

People in this Kangra village had not been isolated from the technological incursions of urban centers. Urmila's children and assorted relatives watched TV when they got the chance, even if the picture was wavy and barely discernible. Narayan writes, "Once, when Urmila was lamenting the coming of television, she observed, 'The only way that children of the future might come to know these stories is if someone like you writes them down. Then they'll read them. . . . But there's a big difference between reading something and hearing it told' "(221). What is happening to the children of these women has already happened to ours. A creative teacher, however, would find Narayan's material alluring for student dramatization or reciprocal practice in the telling and reception of tales, one means of reviving the art and the benefits of "hearing."

Whatever the grade level, any instructor on the sociology or anthropology of South Asian rural life could find many uses for this book. It would also serve, more formally, as an excellent text for folklore and gender studies courses.

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