



2008

Review of: Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires by William R. Pinch

David Curley

Western Washington University, david.curley@wwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://cedar.wwu.edu/liberalstudies_facpubs



Part of the [South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Curley, David, "Review of: Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires by William R. Pinch" (2008). *Liberal Studies*. 5.
http://cedar.wwu.edu/liberalstudies_facpubs/5

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Humanities at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Liberal Studies by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

Review

Author(s): David L. Curley

Review by: David L. Curley

Source: *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (Spring, 2008), pp. 140-142

Published by: Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40377512>

Accessed: 05-05-2016 20:47 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Pacific Affairs*

the growing tendency to seek election victories through outlandish populist promises (the current favourites seem to be free electricity and the forgiveness of debts) as well as a cynical manipulation of communal, caste, tribal and regional allegiances. In the process, “[i]deological filters have become convenient labels for acquiring legitimacy for what is otherwise a blatantly legislative power game” (73).

Van Dyke’s essay brilliantly analyzes the logic and the dynamics of this game through a comparative study of coalition politics and cabinet formation in the three diverse states of Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Kerala. Whereas coalition politics became prevalent at the centre only after the Emergency, in many states they have been practiced since the 1960s. The instability and the “jumbo” nature of Indian state cabinets are at odds with coalition theory, which is based on Western experience, and so is the “strange bedfellows” phenomenon, as found, for example, in the Punjab, where the BJP formed part of the Akali Dal-led governing coalition from 1998 to 2003. Van Dyke shows how a mix of federal factors from outside and factional pressures within, coupled with a continuous urge to exploit patronage opportunities, help explain Indian parties’ proclivity to make or unmake coalitions.

Apart from the Bihar chapter, the concentration on peripheral India in the state studies is welcome. But in five out of seven of these studies, the focus is only minimally on the 2004 national elections (the Andhra Pradesh study is entirely about the state election of 2004). Rather, the authors concentrate too much on the past and on general factors (ethnic/caste enmities, economy, personalities, etc.) that have influenced the course of politics in the state as a whole. In some essays 2004 gets a brief mention and 2004 data are included without explanation in tables. Only in the Bihar and Orissa studies, however, do we get a convincing analysis of the dynamics of the 2004 Lok Sabha seat contests.

The editors thank Sage for excellent proofreading but I found nearly a dozen typos or other editorial problems. Nonetheless, Indian election specialists and casual observers of the Indian political scene will find this book a worthy addition to their libraries.

The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

JOHN R. WOOD

WARRIOR ASCETICS AND INDIAN EMPIRES. *By William R. Pinch.* Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, Sao Paulo: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xi, 280 pp. (Maps, figures, tables.) US\$90.00, cloth. ISBN 0-521-85168-8.

William Pinch’s ambitious book traces ascetic warriors—companies (*akharas*) of men and their retinues who variously called themselves *sanyasis*, *gosains*, *bairagis*, *fakirs* and (especially) *nagas*—from the beginning of the sixteenth

century to the Nehru era. He suggests first, a process of expansion and institutionalization during the seventeenth century under Mughal rule; second, a peak of influence in the eighteenth century when armed ascetics were employed as inexpensive and well-armed infantry and cavalry soldiers; and third, an incomplete domestication of militant ascetics under the suspicious vigilance of British rule and with redefinitions of “proper” Hindu asceticism in modern devotional Hinduism and Hindu nationalism.

Armed yogis clearly antedated Mughal rule. Pinch argues that the terms of Mughal military service increased recruitment of lower caste boys, strengthened the discipline and identity of fighting *akharas* as non-biological corporate groups, especially in Dasnami Saiva orders, and routinized their employment as shock troops of the infantry. At the same time, fighting ascetics also operated independently in wandering and predatory bands. But was their armed asceticism located “beyond the boundaries of fixed, modern religious identities” (97)? The plausibility of this statement depends on the words “fixed” and “modern”; premodern, scalar and emergent identities as more or less Hindu or Muslim, relevant in some kinds of situations and not in others, might better explain the record of occasional conflict as well as cooperation between Muslim *fakirs* and Hindu *sanyasis*.

In two core chapters Pinch traces the careers of Anupgiri Gosain (1734-1804) and his *akhara* and “family” over several generations of disciples, women, adopted slaves and natural children. Pinch effectively uses the career of Anupgiri to undo an image, carefully constructed by Hindu nationalists, of “armed Hindu ascetics as proto-modern Indian patriots . . . defenders of a beleaguered religion (and religious nation)” (9). We are shown, instead, a pragmatic man who accumulated wealth and power through military entrepreneurship, a man with complex and rapidly changing stakes in both Mughal and Company politics, a man willing to serve the highest bidder without regard to religious identity.

In what sense did Anupgiri understand himself as an ascetic? Pinch resists interpretations of “religion” that would classify the pursuit of worldly power as nonreligious by definition, but he asks whether a long-term process of “military institutionalization” may have eroded the “ascetic self-understanding” of warriors like Anupgiri (102). Certainly at the end of his life Anupgiri himself assumed kingly roles different from those of a military entrepreneur.

Shifting and problematic meanings of an ascetic identity reappear when Pinch considers Anupgiri’s *akhara*. Anupgiri and his brother purchased boys who became both disciples (*chelas*) and warriors. He and his followers also had many women in their company, both Hindu and Muslim, who were described as “kept women” and “concubines,” and who described themselves as “begums” and “ranis” (151); these women purchased girls and boys as slaves, adopted some of the latter as sons, produced children of their own, and profoundly influenced internal factions and issues of succession. Pinch clearly shows how in subsequent generations the British “used religion and

respectability to manage and reconstitute the non-biological corporation” of the *akhara* into “discrete family lineages” of “Gosains” (153). Only Hindu women were considered qualified to be regularly espoused wives and to bear them “legitimate” sons, and in 1841 Anupgiri’s estate was declared lapsed by failure of legitimate issue and resumed.

In a chapter on conflicts between yogic ideas of asceticism and devotional Vaisnava ones, Pinch speculates plausibly but with very little evidence about tantric practices by Anupgiri. He is on much firmer ground when he shifts to Vaisnava criticisms of “false ascetics.” Thus, Parshuram in Tulsidas’ *Ramacharitmanas* was represented as an armed Saiva ascetic, and in the end he was tamed by devotion to Rama, gave up his arms, and “withdrew to the forest to practice penance” (215). A final chapter briefly sketches some of the ways militant asceticism has continued to be both disciplined by the Indian state and relevant to Hindu nationalism.

Pinch has discovered and employed wonderful visual materials, and many oral traditions of both Saiva and Vaisnava ascetics to match his thorough research in Company records. He might have noticed texts which represent asceticism as a necessary but temporary practice for ordinary heroes and warriors during military campaigns (for example, Alf Hildebeitel, *Draupadi among Rajputs, Muslims and Dalits: Rethinking India’s Oral and Classical Epics*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999; and Lindsay Harlan, *The Goddesses’ Henchmen: Gender in Indian Hero Worship*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Western Washington University, Bellingham, USA

DAVID L. CURLEY

BRICK BY BRICK: The Building of an ASEAN Economic Community.

Edited by Denis Hew. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. 2007. 252 pp. \$US 25.90, soft cover. ISBN 978-981-230-732-3, \$US 45.90, hard cover ISBN 978-981-230-733-0.

Hew introduces his edited volume by contending: “The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is one of the world’s most successful regional economic organizations. Established on 8 August 1967, ASEAN consists of ten member countries, namely Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam” (1). He notes further: “Since its inception four decades ago, ASEAN has successfully managed to foster closer political and security cooperation, creating a peaceful and stable region ... (with) impressive economic growth” (1).

His volume’s contents demonstrate that ASEAN has been, and continues to be, a living organization in terms of its external and internal policy and programme initiatives. Externally it has recently built an ASEAN+3 with Mainland China, Japan and South Korea, as well as expanding its economic