

Ann Grodzins Gold: *Fruitful journeys: the ways of Rajasthani pilgrims*. xviii, 333 pp. Berkeley etc.: University of California Press, 1988.

[I don't know how I managed to write this review, back in 1989, without once using the word 'ethnography', which is of course on everybody's tongue nowadays.]

This is a study of pilgrimage as defined in its various contexts, local as well as trans-regional, but described always from the point of view of the householder. Rather than concentrate primarily on a *tīrtha* as the focus of pilgrimage and its associated rites, the author has taken the role of a Rajasthani villager, and has participated in a variety of pilgrimages from their inception to the final consummation of their associated rituals — in some cases, several months after the end of the journey itself. The result of this apparently simple contrivance is a lucid, perceptive and sympathetic account of popular Hinduism and its view of this world and the next.

The main location of Gold's research was the village of Ghatiyali, in the Ajmer district of Rajasthan. Introduced to the village by Joseph Miller, who was researching oral epics, Gold found it an ideal centre for her own work. It included a wide range of castes, and a 'curing' shrine which attracted its own pilgrims from beyond the village. The book begins with a description of the process by which the author acclimated herself to her surroundings; this is no self-indulgence, but rather an account of her awareness of the extent to which her findings would be coloured by her own presence in the village. The author's difficult choice of appropriate clothing, as deemed acceptable to all castes without showing undue favour to any one grouping, seems to have symbolized a diplomacy and sensitivity characteristic of her dealings with the villagers and their perceptions and culture.

Through the early chapters, the reader is introduced to the *dramatis personae* of Ghatiyali: village life is the sum of relationships between the principal humans, deities, and manes living within its boundaries. The polarities of death and childbirth form a constant in the rituals performed at the local shrines. Journeys made to regional deities typically have some 'work' or specific purpose attached to them, often underwritten by the making and fulfilling of vows; such journeys or *jātrā* are distinguished from the more ambitious pilgrimages or *yātrā* made to major *tīrthas* such as Hardwar, Banaras, Gaya and Puri which are described later in the book.

Gold's accounts of the journeys and their rewards are detailed and perceptive. Familiar stereotypical associations of pilgrimage such as the greed of the *pāṇḍās*,

the awfulness of Gaya, and the ambivalence of scriptural authority as to the efficacy of bathing in sacred waters are here retailed in abundance; but Gold's position as an accepted member of the pilgrimage party also gives her an unrivalled degree of access to the feelings of the pilgrims as they encounter these experiences for themselves. The purpose and 'fruit' of pilgrimage is a constant theme at the centre of many an interview. While it is not surprising to find a broad spectrum of views, ranging from the simplistically pious to the brazenly sceptical, it is rather more revealing to find that *mokṣa*, the supposed aim of the long road to the sacred sites of Hinduism, hardly features in the travellers' own perceptions of what they are hoping for. While the sinking of cremated remains (*phūl*, doggedly translated as 'flowers' throughout this book) has the clear intention of assuring a smooth 'passage' (*gati*) for the departed soul, the nature of that passage is not that of salvation from rebirth, but rather salvation from the wandering in limbo that befalls deceased spirits such as the *pattar* and the *jhūjhār*. There is a sharp contrast between the clearly perceived function of vows made to local deities on the one hand, and the more ambiguous purposes associated with the pilgrimage-cum-tourism of a bus trip to Puri or the Sangam. Perhaps there is only one sure outcome of such a journey: 'The effect is one of lightening: the returning pilgrim should be thinner and poorer' (p. 263).

A few minor defects may be listed briefly. There is some frustration for the reader when the original of a translated term is not given; the retention of a few quaintly literal translations (as in the section heading on p. 233, 'Why Sink Flowers? No Wandering-Turning for the Ghost-Soul') is out of keeping with the restrained tenor of the book as a whole; dubious elucidation of the syntax of a song on p. 294 throws doubt on the accuracy of Gold's translations; and future editions may care to correct a number of slips in Indian words: 'to wander' is not *baṭhaknā* (p. 261) or *baṭaknā* (p. 295) but *bhaṭaknā*; a *lākh* is of course 100,000, not 10,000 (p. 312), etc. Finally, can there really be such a name as 'Gam Shyam'?

It is not easy to evoke the subtle and sophisticated manner in which this book is conceived and written. Taking the village as a starting point not only sets the pilgrimage accounts in their logically correct perspective, but also lends a persuasive narrative aspect to the presentation of the ethnographic data. It is frequently the baroque details of Gold's observations, as much as the broader sweep of her arguments, which compel. 'The educated town-dwellers formed a distinct front-of-the-bus elite. Among themselves they referred to the Mehru folk as the "British Battalion" or simple "Angrez" ..., because the peasants were in their eyes awkward and stupid like the English' (p. 269). The background presence of Miller, who supplied many of the photographs, shadows the narrative with ambiguous tensions.

With perception and sympathetic humour, and without imposing any prefabricated social theory onto her material, Gold succeeds in portraying a complex world with great skill. Perhaps one of the book's most reassuring virtues is its constantly implicit realisation of the Westerner's anomalous and alien status in the Ghatiyalian world. Gold does not take herself too seriously, and does not mind reporting the following exchange (p. 290): 'Interviewer: "What fruit is received from pilgrimage?" Pilgrim: "God knows" '.

Rupert Snell