



Fuller, C. J. *The Renewal of the Priesthood: Modernity and Traditionalism in a South Indian Temple*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004. 207pp. ISBN 069111658X, \$17.95.

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The *Renewal of the Priesthood* is an insightful account amassing 25 years of ethnographic immersion in the lives and livelihood of priests in one of India's most prominent sacred sites, the Minakshi Temple. The book, described by the author as a 'part sequel' to an equally insightful foray into the lives and times of temple priests—*Servants of the Goddess: The Priests of a South Indian Temple* (Christopher Fuller, Cambridge University Press, 1984), vividly illustrates how the temple priests have come to typify the modernity/tradition symbiosis in the contemporary Indian nation State. The book is organised around six succinct interconnected chapters capturing the reversal in the temple priest's four decade old decline. The author locates this reversal in priestly fortunes within the growing priestly traditionalism since the late 1970s as they begin to repose renewed ideological commitment in the archaic educational practices enshrined in *Agamas* texts that encapsulate the formal description of ritual performance as well as ancient customs of the temple and the attendant norms of priesthood. However, traditionalism in India seldom stands alone. Fuller demonstrates how the inroads made by the modernist values and attitudes in all aspects of priestly traditionalism, most notable in the improvised face of Agamic education, when confronted by the instruments of modern state ranging from political ideology, bureaucratic regulations to court judgements produces a 'paradoxical amalgam.' This amalgam exemplifies the spliced but betwixt Indian modernity where, as Fuller puts it, "modernity can engender traditionalism but ...traditionalism can constitute and promote modernity... while simultaneously emphasizing the divine authority of tradition" (p. 167).

The core strength of the book lies in successfully capturing the pre-eminence of Agamic education and its ability to incorporate 'modern features' into the folds of traditional pedagogical practices. The Agamic corpus comprises of 28 fundamental Agamas and over two hundred secondary Agamas with the earliest Agamas dating back to the 7th and 8th centuries. These texts, whilst do not contain a theoretical core, provide a guide to formal rendition of how rituals ought to be performed. The instructions are complex, even convoluted, and very often pose enormous difficulty when the minutiae of ritual performance and enactment are invoked. The key component of Agamic education is a concerted effort to memorise material that is to be uttered as part of the ritual. Hence, most vitally, Agamic education enjoins the student to enunciate and modulate the



mantras and other textual materials in great fastidious detail. However, pupils in Agamic schools are exposed to ordinary schooling and are more than familiar with ‘secular’ pedagogic tropes. While the entrants to these schools, including the priests themselves, insist on similarities between Agamic and secular education, Fuller situates these contentions in a wider constellation of ideas in the ‘modern world’ where education has come to mean acquiring book based knowledge. This need to equate Agamic education with secular pedagogic modalities is indicative of a wider professionalization of priesthood within the context of the present day economy and society in India. Thus, Fuller describes how Agamic schools have come to incorporate many modern (even secular) features. This amalgam, he argues, produces from within the confines of a “traditional” pedagogical practice, educated “modern” individuals aware of self-questioning and reform (p. 111). The coming together of these domains for Fuller accomplishes the production of a younger generation of priests who reconcile the seemingly antithetical domains and statues of “guardians of tradition” and “modern experts.”

Through this in depth ethnography, Fuller singularly accomplishes a potent critique of various misconceptions about traditions and modernity that abound in social science thinking. He argues that traditions can often be more stable and enduring than the “mutating social and political contexts that promote their invention” (p. 163). In so arguing, he acknowledges Gyan Prakash’s formulation of a ‘Janus-faced Indian modernity’ (see *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*. Gyan P. Prakash, Princeton University Press, 1999) to suggest that modernity does not inevitably swallow up traditionalism but rather each facilitates the other’s reformulation.

The book is a lucid recapitulation of the changes in the late 20th century globalising India and how events hitherto unanticipated, both within the temple and the temple town of Madurai, have shaped and changed the lives of the temple priests and their sacred vocation. C. J. Fuller has yet again crafted a compelling ethnography, a must read for anyone interested in cultural aspects of pedagogy, religion, ritual, and the very nature of tradition and modernity in contemporary India.

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