

2007

## River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of Northern India

Pratyusha Basu  
*University of South Florida*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jea>

---

### Recommended Citation

Basu, Pratyusha. "River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of Northern India." *Journal of Ecological Anthropology* 11, no. 1 (2007): 74-76.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jea/vol11/iss1/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Ecological Anthropology by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usf.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usf.edu).

## BOOK REVIEWS

## River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of Northern India

DAVID HABERMAN

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS,  
BERKELEY, CA, 2006

XV + 277 PP. \$26.95 PAPERBACK

REVIEWED BY PRATYUSHA BASU

As human-induced environmental problems take on global proportions, understanding the intersections of religion and environmentalism has become part of attempts to expand the scope of contemporary environmental debates. Seeking to harness the positive aspects of religious beliefs, including the ability to reflect on the larger questions of human existence and the perseverance to accede to the everyday demands of a moral life, David Haberman's study of Hindu religious practices along India's Yamuna river is a significant addition to the field of religious environmentalism. Melding poetic contemplation, scientific measurement, and environmental activism, Haberman traces the Yamuna river through the heartland of India, drawing particular attention to the region of Braj, where the Yamuna river is especially revered and currently the object of active efforts for protection.

Chapter 2 begins with an oft-asked question: Is Hinduism eco-friendly? Given that the deified personification of elements of nature is central to Hindu religious practices, the answer to this question seems self-evident. Haberman however points out that many scholars have argued to the contrary, asserting that the transcendental aspects of Hinduism are obstacles to serious engagement with the material aspects of nature. Against this, Haberman posits that while Hinduism does include world-

denying asceticism, or *advaita* traditions, it also comprises world-affirming temple cults in the form of the *bhagvata* tradition. In the case of religious and environmentalist activities around the Yamuna river, it is the latter strand that dominates. But the question central to Haberman's study is not the question of existing Hindu traditions as much as that of the future of river-based religious environmentalism in India. What happens to the divinity of the river when its water is visibly loaded with sewage?

To gain some insight into possible futures of river-centered religiosity, Haberman begins at the source of the Yamuna in Chapter 3. His own immersion in devotional activities associated with the river emerges vividly here, and journeys of many kinds permeate this chapter: pilgrims attest to the river's ability to ward off the sufferings of death, and the idol of the river itself is ceremonially carried to her brother's house where she resides for part of the year. Chapter 4 takes on a different tone, as the Yamuna flows through the city of Delhi, a city defined by its location on the banks of the river, and now responsible for changing the nature of the river for the worse. As Haberman recounts the degradation of water quality of the Yamuna at Delhi, he is also documenting the history of urbanization in India, and poetic rhythms fade in the dire predictions of environmental reports.

Chapter 4 is the center of the book. It focuses on the region of Braj, associated according to Haberman with the most passionate forms of worship of the Yamuna. The polluted nature of the river at Braj, given that the region is located downstream of Delhi, may raise concerns about the clash between its ritual significance and material impurity. The discussion in Chapter 2 of pilgrimages to the source of the river may suggest that there are other sites that are equally sacred and much cleaner that can be associated with the Yamuna. Haberman however skillfully utilizes poetic texts and ethnographic evidence to depict how links between the river Yamuna and the cowherd god Krishna make the river's journey through Braj the most meaningful part of its course. The only problem with such depictions, and one that Haberman alludes to in an

endnote [note 134, p.252], is the ways in which the female river attains meaning through male deities, whether through taking the form of the lover of Krishna in Braj, or as the sister of Yama at its source. It is mentioned however that the river is privileged as the lover, and not the wife, of Krishna, so that there may also be some escape from patriarchal constraints in its flow.

In Chapter 5, Haberman takes us to the core concern of the book, the future of river-based religious practices in the face of life-threatening pollution of the river's waters, and seeks solace in the rise of environmental movements which utilize Hindu beliefs in the sacredness of the river to attract people to campaigns for cleaning the river. Haberman interviews a range of actors associated with such movements, from Hindu religious leaders, to local and foreign devotees of the river, to government functionaries responsible for devising and implementing river restoration plans. The state and its legal apparatus, in the form of the Yamuna Action Plan and judgments pronounced by the Supreme Court, make an appearance here. This suggests that while environmental activism might begin in personal experiences of Hindu practices, it also requires alliances with bodies of the state. Yet, Haberman points out that the implementation and enforcement of plans and judgments leaves much to be desired, so that while environmental activism around the Yamuna can be located between ideologies of the state and religious ideals, Haberman places his hopes on religious awakening.

This carries us to the conclusion of the book where Haberman more clearly articulates his understanding of the differences between Western and Eastern environmentalisms. Haberman is certain that Hindu religious practices centered on the Yamuna enable a well-grounded 'love' for nature (pp.194-195), but for him the greater contribution of Hindu philosophy is the ability to provide a 'balance' between ascetic indifference and ordinary attachment (p.192), or as he says at the beginning of the book, 'the aim is to find a way that neither denies nor is defeated by the serious problems we face today' (p.2). Given that 'crisis' is usually the

keyword evoked by Western environmental narratives, the invocation of 'love' is an alternative that can be lauded. Yet, in the interests of balance, it is important to take issue with the book on at least two counts.

First, it is interesting that a study that seeks to overturn Orientalist understandings of Hinduism (in Chapter 2), concludes by magnifying the differences between river environmentalisms in India and the U.S. According to Haberman, deep ecology can be directly linked to Gandhi and Hindu religious practices, even as Ramachandra Guha (1997) has already provided us with a hard-hitting criticism of such associations, arguing that deep ecology is a Western ideal foisted on an imagined East, and that environmental movements in India are more likely to focus on the question of social justice. My point here of course is not to privilege Guha over Haberman, as much as to suggest that all reductions are problematic, so that Haberman and Guha have to be read together to understand that river-based environmentalisms in India are more varied than either author suggests. For instance, the movement against dams on India's Narmada river shows us that religion is not always the main motivator for river environmentalisms in India (Baviskar 1995).

In describing the difference between the U.S. and India, Haberman points to the role of fishermen in U.S. movements, while stating that activists in India are more likely to wave *aarti* (prayer) lamps than fishing poles (p.183). He does not clarify the reason for this apparent difference, and this is my second criticism of Haberman's work. The absence of caste in his study leaves very little space for understanding how the fishermen whose livelihoods depend on the quality of the river are not part of environmental movements to protect the Yamuna. While there is no question that Hindu beliefs are a valuable addition to rethinking the nature of the world, we can neither forget that the rise of Hindu fundamentalism as a political force in India is likely to have reached into the region of Braj, nor that environmental movements that draw on one particular religious meaning do not do justice to the variety of cultures residing along India's rivers. It is

interesting that the ethnographic voices presented by Haberman do not raise these issues, but seem to neatly fit into his overall narrative. Haberman's study thus produces silences as much as it seeks to illuminate Hindu environmentalism around the Yamuna.

This book will be useful across a wide range of scholarly endeavors, from South Asian to environmental studies. Written in a personable style, it is also likely to draw in readers whose primary interests are not academic, since it is a remarkable description of travel along the Yamuna river and provides an opportunity to follow an expert scholar into Hindu cultural texts and contexts. However, though a compelling read by itself, the book is likely to be even more useful when combined with critical understandings of religious environmentalism in India.

## REFERENCES CITED

BAVISKAR, A.

- 1995 *In the belly of the river: Tribal conflicts over development in the Narmada Valley*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

GUHA, R.

- 1997 "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," in *Varieties of environmentalism: Essays north and south*. Edited by Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, pp. 92-108. London: Earthscan Publications.

---

Pratyusha Basu, Department of Geography,  
University of South Florida,  
pbasu@cas.usf.edu

## Generative Social Science: Studies in Agent-Based Computational Modeling

JOSHUA M. EPSTEIN

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS,

PRINCETON, NJ, 2007

352 PP. CLOTH \$49.50

REVIEWED BY ERIC C. JONES

This book calls for a generative social science. Generative social science rests on the idea that you cannot explain current phenomena without describing the rules or preceding conditions that produced these current phenomena. In other words, the author believes that we must not only explore causality in terms of 'A affects B,' but also in terms of how a specific suite of physical, biological, social or cultural tendencies play out across time for a given population, producing some observed state or phenomenon. Epstein argues that anything short of being able to model the flow between prior and present conditions is mere description. He says his naming of the Generative approach took inspiration from Chomsky's *generative* syntactic structures.

Generative social science is tightly wed to the methodology of Agent-Based Modeling made more feasible lately by faster computers. However, Epstein warns against its identification solely as a computer-driven technique. His point is that past behavior of individuals, households, firms or other agents must be accounted for when understanding a phenomenon. Following the lead of mathematicians and most modelers, the author seeks parsimonious or small sets of rules to explain the arrival at any current condition.

This 'new' kind of social science is probably too mathematical for most ethnographically oriented social scientists to adopt, although this historicist/evolutionary approach is one that must regularly be