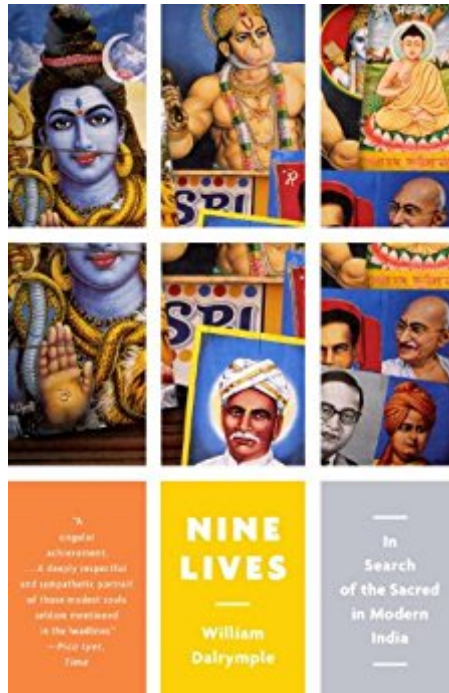


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Nine Lives: In Search Of The Sacred In Modern India



Synopsis

From the author of *The Last Mughal* (â œA compulsively readable masterpieceâ • â ”The New York Review of Books), an exquisite, mesmerizing book that illuminates the remarkable ways in which traditional forms of religious life in India have been transformed in the vortex of the regionâ™s rapid changeâ” a book that distills the authorâ™s twenty-five years of travel in India, taking us deep into ways of life that we might otherwise never have known exist. A Buddhist monk takes up arms to resist the Chinese invasion of Tibetâ” and spends the rest of his life atoning for the violence by hand printing the finest prayer flags in India . . . A Jain nun tests her powers of detachment as she watches her closest friend ritually starve herself to death . . . A woman leaves her middle-class life in Calcutta and finds unexpected fulfillment living as a Tantric in an isolated, skull-filled cremation ground . . . A prison warder from Kerala is worshipped as an incarnate deity for three months of every year . . . An idol carver, the twenty-third in a long line of sculptors, must reconcile himself to his sonâ™s desire to study computer engineering . . . An illiterate goatherd from Rajasthan keeps alive in his memory an ancient four-thousand-stanza sacred epic . . . A temple prostitute, who initially resisted her own initiation into sex work, pushes both her daughters into a trade she nonetheless regards as a sacred calling. William Dalrymple chronicles these lives with expansive insight and a spellbinding evocation of circumstance. And while the stories reveal the vigorous resilience of individuals in the face of the relentless onslaught of modernity, they reveal as well the continuity of ancient traditions that endure to this day. A dazzling travelogue of both place and spirit.

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Customer Reviews

Highly interesting, wonderfully researched, beautifully written, as are all of this author's works. A main question seems to be whether often-isolated, syncretistic, devotional religious practices will continue in the face of India's burgeoning economy and, presumably, growing secularism and consumerism, on the one hand, and the exclusionary fanaticism of a militant segment of Hindus and Muslims, on the other. While much will be gained by greater educational opportunity and a higher/healthier standard of living for the rural and urban poor and powerless, rich, curious, sometimes bizarre religious practices in the name of the gods will probably fade away. This book is not about mainstream religious practices or faiths of the great religions --- or even of "smaller traditions" that have gained acceptance, if not understanding, because of their great age. The "Sacred" referred to in the title are approaches to gods/God that are, for all the integrity of those interviewed who practice them, mightily strange. The book certainly shows that devout, faithful approaches to belief are common to all levels of people and a belief in a "greater power" is sustaining in the most difficult of situations. The book is a wondrous "read" about good people whom most of us will never otherwise hear.

I read this book in India about a year ago while on vacation. Since I write about India in my own fiction I often hope to pick up more insights from other writers. Dalrymple is one of my favorite writers, and this is one of my favorite books. The author explores the lives of nine individuals who have given their lives in one way or another to the pursuit of the spiritual and the sacred. The first one of the lives he explores is that of a Jain nun who struggles with the loss of her companion and contemplates suicide. That last person he interviews is a Baul, a member of a Bengali caste that has rejected the rigid life of Indian society. For over 500 years the Bauls have wandered the country, mostly North India and Bangladesh, singing their songs and living outside acceptable society. The man the author interviews is a blind Baul singer who talks about his life as a devotee. Especially moving is the story of a Buddhist monk who leaves Tibet during the invasion of the Chinese in 1954 and in India confronts his own prejudices and thinks deeply about what it means to

be a devotee. This book moved me as few others have.

Read the book out in a weekend - was glad the author took the time to document several people who follow various religious paths in danger of being submerged by the homogeneity of the larger organized religions like Wahhabi Islam and orthodox Hinduism. While I was grateful that those interviewed shared their life stories all of which evoked more than a touch of pathos; I wondered about Mr Darymple profiting off them, but acknowledge a more respectful attitude towards those he encountered compared to his first book- In Xanadu- which I also enjoyed. A couple of the stories illustrated how the rigid, strait-laced Indian society fostered the extremes that people would go to express themselves- in the first and last stories, children of well-to-do families rejected the conventional 'safe' path for the unknown- one embracing celibacy, although supposedly practising non-attachment, was devastated when the companion of 20 years died- and the other engaging in tantric-like Baul practices. Published in 2009, it documented well the devastation of HIV/AIDS on one family forced to continue in prostitution under the 'tradition' of dedicating the young girls to Yellamma/becoming devadasis - applicable to pre-Mughal India, certainly not 21st century 'Shining India'! The book was very informative about Sufism and illustrated well the devastation Partition had on the lives of ordinary Indians. The story about the Idol-maker reminded me of the part in Anil's Ghost where the final part of installation of the eyes is very sacred, but sadly that tradition is also under threat of the Mass-produced market. Interesting and informative too was the fact that the erotic images/sculptures on the Khujharo temples were illustrating Tantric practices prevalent when the temple was being built.

A fascinating, superbly written book about the variety of religious paths followed by nine different Asian Indians. This is not a book about Westerners abroad pursuing a spiritual path. Dalrymple, an Englishman who has lived in India for a number of years, is, in addition to having published several other books dealing with the subcontinent, the director of a book festival in India. He charts a variety of traditions as embodied and advanced in nine different people. The chapter on the Jain devotee, a path that focuses on self-abnegation, is disturbing to read. The young woman who is the focus of the chapter slowly strips herself of all material comforts, eventually choosing suicide as the ultimate accomplishment of her path. Each chapter presents a captivating exposition of other religious paths in India. Highly recommended for a captivating look at the present through the prism of Indian religious historical tradition.

Well researched and written. Excellent insight into at least some of India's vast philosophical and spiritual traditions. A fascinating read.

Read this as I was travelling in Sikkim, and as usual, gained insight and more love for India as I read on. This author never fails me, and I called home and insisted that my mother, who initially recommended him to me, immediately get this book and read it so we could talk about it when I returned. With gentleness and humor, perspective, respect and admiration for his subjects, Dalrymple attempts to unlock the mystery of those seeking the path less taken. His writing style puts you with him in an intimate yet non-claustrophobic way. Highly recommend if you love beautiful writing and interesting ideas.

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