

Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Hindu Myths: a sourcebook translated from the Sanskrit with an introduction* (Penguin Classics, 1975, reprinted 1976.) Pp. 358. 90p.

Hindu India must have by far the largest body of mythological literature recorded anywhere in the world, but it has been singularly ill served by translators and expositors. The only respectable (i.e. factually reliable) work which attempts to survey the field in one volume is Keith's contribution (1917) to the *Mythology of all Races* series; but Keith, hampered by rigid preconceptions about interpretation (he saw most gods as personifications of natural phenomena), proceeded by a kind of mythological prosopopoea, just listing divinities, and related so few myths, even in summary, that he gave his readers hardly any impression of what the stories are like. Moreover, he berated his sources for inconsistency in a way at which Lévi-Strauss has taught us to smile. For we no longer believe that one version of a myth must be the true one any more than we believe that one interpretation, or even one type of interpretation (e.g. euhemeristic, psychoanalytic, Marxist) must be correct. X

It is Dr Wendy O'Flaherty who first used Lévi-Strauss' insight to study Hindu myths, and who first made one corpus of those myths accessible to the west, in her learned and exciting 'Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Śiva'. She has now used her expository genius to make Hindu myths available to a wider public. This is an even harder task than the production of a scholarly monograph, and has been no less successfully carried out.

The 75 myths are sorted by their protagonist deities and so arranged into 7 chapters. Each myth is prefaced by a short introduction, and within chapters the myths are skilfully strung together. This concatenation is most useful when we are dealing with Vedic myths, which often the oldest texts retail only in fragmentary form; the author adduces later texts and commentaries (e.g. for myth 14) to give the story coherence. The myths are told in their own words, i.e. in Dr O'Flaherty's translations from the Sanskrit. This is not always a straightforward matter, for sometimes (e.g. myth 40) she has had to make her own edition of the text before presenting it to us. The translations read fluently. Nevertheless, the texture of the book is sometimes dense: naturally, texts have been chosen for their coverage of stories with a minimum of redundancy, so that the proliferation of characters and pace of events may make the unwary reader's head spin. Appendix D, the 'Glossary and Index of Proper Names', will help him. However, I suspect that there is another and ineluctable reason for the book's opacity. In so far as the book aims to give a representative cross-section of a vast field, it cannot have as clear a focus as the monograph which selects only material relevant to a thesis; thus in succeeding in presenting us with interesting variety, Dr O'Flaherty has had to make some aesthetic sacrifice, and to give us something closer to a reference work than to a book of short stories.

However, the book does not lack unity of conception. Intellectually, it is a triumph, and will fascinate any student of mythology, of comparative religion, or of Indian culture; moreover, it is equally reliable for the beginner and for the scholar. Not only is there a 'Selected' but extensive general bibliography; the book's most remarkable feature is Appendix C, 'Bibliographical Notes', which for each myth not only cites the Sanskrit texts which contain parallel versions, but also lists all modern secondary literature. This book by itself thus enables even an ignorant teacher to construct a course of almost any duration on Hindu myths: it is a kind of Teach Yourself Hindu Mythology, a do-it-yourself Lévi-Strauss handbook. Plus a sense of humour. For the bibliography on a Śaivite myth (p. 326) includes *Hindu Mythologie und Kastrationscomplex, eine psychoanalytische Studie*. When I expostulated with the author, she replied, 'When I sit down to work I plug in my typewriter, turn on my desk light, and put my tongue in my cheek.' Hindu mythology is full of fun: thank goodness for an author who is in harmony with it.

To have these myths before us will clear up many current misconceptions

about Hinduism. To name but two: despite *Bhagavad Gītā* iv. 8 ('For the protection of the good and the destruction of the wicked, and to establish right (*dharma*), I come into being in eon after eon'), not all Viṣṇu's avatars are good (myth 62); and his tenth avatar, Kalkin, does not bring a holocaust: he destroys only evildoers and barbarians (myth 63). We barbarians are indebted to the Penguin Classics for publishing this book. That we are not unconscious of the debt is already evident from the rapid appearance of a second impression.

RICHARD GOMBRICH