



The Association for
Asian Studies

Review: [untitled]

Author(s): Karen Lang

Reviewed work(s):

The Asrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution by Patrick Olivelle

Source: *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Aug., 1996), pp. 762-763

Published by: Association for Asian Studies

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2646495>

Accessed: 04/01/2010 10:19

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=afas>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Association for Asian Studies is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Asian Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

love for humanity irrespective of caste, religion, or race. Operating in a plural world, the Sikh protagonists in his fiction (like Sundari who tears her scarf to bandage even her enemy) fully put Guru Nanak's concept of the One Ultimate into everyday life.

Is Oberoi also mistaking identity for boundary? With Guru Nanak, Sikh identity is firmly established but boundaries were not demarcated nor have they been to date. Is it that the author is trying to construct parameters and reify the dynamic and ever-accumulating tradition of the Sikhs? Sikh identity is a revisioning and practical living out of the essential and universal truth which lies beyond exclusions and boundaries, a truth embodied in Guru Nanak's words, "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim."

Oberoi's approach is a new way of doing history where the central is ignored and the peripheral is exalted. He debunks the central Sikh fact: "For a social historian it is unimportant whether or not Guru Gobind Singh formally declared the Adi Granth a guru" (p. 70). His new way of constructing history rests on the articulation of a privately conceived notion through copious footnotes and bibliography. It tends to produce a scholarly facade rather than a true reading of the primary Sikh texts or a real understanding of the personal aspirations of the Sikhs.

NIKKY-GUNINDER KAUR SINGH
Colby College

The Āśrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution. By PATRICK OLIVELLE. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. xxii, 274 pp. \$49.95 (cloth).

Patrick Olivelle explores the theological and historical context in which the system of four *āśramas*—the modes of life of a vedic student, a married householder, a forest hermit, and a world renouncer—arose, developed and, in association with social class (*varṇa*), came to characterize the religious tradition we call Hinduism. Olivelle's analysis of classical brahmanical texts challenges the widely held assumption that the *āśrama* and *varṇa* system, like the *dharmā* that they embody, is fixed and unchanging. In part 1, he explains how brahmanical theology and institutions define the *āśrama* system. Parts 2 and 3 concern the system's origins and the changes that led to the development of the classical formulation.

Olivelle contends that the *āśrama* system originated as a theological construct only indirectly related to the corresponding social institutions, vedic studentship, etc., which existed independently before and after its creation. Just whose residence or mode of life was first characterized as an *āśrama* is the central question Olivelle seeks to answer. He finds that even in non-Brahmanical sources, the term is fundamentally a Brahmanical concept that refers to the place (apart from normal society but perhaps not always in the wilderness) and by extension the lives of exceptional Brahmins centered around the performance of the fire sacrifice. The original formulation regards the four *āśramas* as alternate and equally legitimate permanent modes of life, unrelated either to adolescence or old age and retirement, which a young adult male chooses after completing his vedic studentship. The timing and permanence of this choice, however, appear to reflect more "the exigencies of theology than historical reality" (p. 112) since the literature of the period shows that married people became wandering mendicants and that there were several socioreligious institutions, some involving old age and retirement, associated with withdrawal from society to the wilderness. Olivelle thus concludes that the system was a "theological innovation" created by Brahmins

sympathetic towards the ideals of celibacy and renunciation “to legitimize modes of life different from that of the householder by providing a place for them within the sphere of *dharmā*, thereby stretching this central concept in a new direction” (p. 96).

The transition from the original to the classical system, Olivelle argues, entailed a shift from the hermeneutical principle of “choice” to that of “totality,” exemplified by the sacramentary (*samskāra*) system, in which all the rites are obligatory but performed at different times during an individual’s life. In the classical system a boy’s vedic initiation marks the rite of entry into the first *āśrama*. The successive passage through all the *āśramas*, if not obligatory, then becomes an idealized goal. Olivelle distinguishes carefully between the theological system and the corresponding social institutions. The fact that the system was created with upper-class men in mind does not necessarily mean that women and the lower classes did not participate in the social institutions, since historical evidence indicates that women and *Śūdras* did become ascetics.

While Olivelle regards writing a history of the *āśrama* system as “an exercise in tracing the hermeneutical controversies within Brahmanism” (p. 7), his history also concerns hermeneutical controversies within modern scholarship. He attacks with vigor and persuasive force the common view that the Brahmins created the *āśrama* system to stem the tide of the ascetical movement by coopting into the Brahmanical system the very institutions opposed to it. This is an important book based upon a thorough and meticulous reading of primary sources. Olivelle points out that the total absence of any primary sources that associate the four *āśramas* with pleasure, wealth, righteousness, liberation, the four aims of human life (*puruṣārthas*) indicates that any modern attempt to do so is “an act of scholarly imagination.” This book is of immense value not only to Indologists and historians of religion concerned with the interpretation of classical texts, but also to anthropologists and sociologists engaged in studies of contemporary Indian institutions.

KAREN LANG
University of Virginia

From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women. Edited by BHARATI RAY.
Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995. xii, 294 pp. \$29.95 (cloth).

Bharati Ray’s introduction provides the intellectual rationale and criteria which guided the authors of this collection. Emphasis is equally given to social structures which constrained women as well as to the agency of women who sought to resist and challenge such barriers. In addition, attention was also to be given to the ideological realm—“the cultural representation of womanhood and women’s self-images”—along with the political and economic setting. Finally, the main organizing principle was to be gender—highlighting different roles for men and women, reinforcing cultural traditions and symbols, and its visibility at different sites. Gender analysis enmeshes other critical variables such class, caste, religion, and other ethnicities specific to each situation. Without essentializing patriarchy, the goal was to identify contours in a hierarchical, gendered social order.

Six essays deal with the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries; two study the contemporary period. With one exception, all primarily deal with Bengal.

Sekhar Bandopadhyay examines the failure of widow-remarriage reform among middle and lower castes in Bengal, despite the passage of the Act of 1856 legalizing