

people who transmit questions asked of the god by temple visitors, etc. Seaman spends thirteen pages (82–94) describing a typical seance.

Of course we learn about the philosophy of the spirit writing cult, its evolution through the ages, and even some of its written precepts. But Professor Seaman does even more; he weaves the activities of the spirit writing cult into the social and political life of the town's citizens. It seems the leading member of the spirit writing cult in the town is also a local strongman who wields considerable political and economic influence in the area. His network of cronies can swing elections, buy votes, pass out bribes, or beat up local rivals they encounter. Being a member of the spirit writing cult will not only help one to receive guidance from the gods, it can be of quite practical use as well.

The political intrigues of the spirit writing cult, as well as the adventures of its leader "Boss Ng," are described in an historical dimension. This discussion traces the cult from the period of the Japanese occupation until 1945, through the confusing times of the late 1940s, and into the period of KMT rule from the 1950s until today. Professor Seaman has done a masterful job of setting forth the historical development of the spirit writing cult in this community during the past forty-plus years.

This is a rich study that touches on many points which will be of interest to anthropologists, sociologists and scholars specializing in folk religion. It is exciting to learn so much about the heretofore guarded secrets of the spirit writing cult, and it is equally rewarding to end up knowing so much about life in the market town where Seaman lived. The observations he presents are sophisticated and convincing and, in spite of its modest length, this book contains a wealth of information.

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INDIA

BECK, BRENDA E. F. *The Three Twins: The Telling of a South Indian Folk Epic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982. Viii+248 pp. 27 plates, 4 appendices, bibliography, index. Hardbound US \$22.50 (£13.50 in the U.K., US \$28.13 in the rest of the world). ISBN 0-253-36014-5

The study of Indian folk epic—the non-Sanskritic variety of the great epic tradition of the subcontinent—has by and large remained neglected. The attention the classical epics such as *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* have received from anthropologists, folklorists and scholars of literature is unparalleled and cannot be compared with the few attempts that have been made recently by some young scholars to study the less known, non-Sanskritic traditions of Indian folk epics sometimes associated with "Little Tradition."

Brenda Beck's present work on a popular South Indian folk epic is yet another big step toward understanding the strength of the folk epic tradition of India. Some studies on similar regional folk epics have been made earlier by Roghair (Andhra), Lapoint (Rajasthan), Claus (Karnataka); many more are awaiting the sharp tools of folklore scholars.

Peter Edwin Hook's (1979) interesting study seeks to define a "literary area" (*Literaturbund*) in South and Central Asia. Inspired by Colin Masica's pioneering work on the systematic definition of a "linguistic area," Hook attempts to show the

diffusion of Indian literary motifs, particularly the marriage of heroines, and genres, into South and Central Asian oral as well as literary traditions. Hook carefully selects the most popular and widely diffused marriage motif of Nala-Damayanti, Satyawān-Sāvitrī, Kōvalam-Kannaki, Sitā-Rāma and Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa, from India and attempts to look for its reflection in such South and Central Asian epics as *Manas* (Kirghiz), *Kyz Zhibek*, *Kozy Körpösh* and *Er Sain* (Kazakh), *K'hun Chang K'hun P'hen* (Thailand) and *Kim-Van-Kieu* (Viet-Nam), which are equally popular and prestigious in their respective regions. Hook's hypothesis seems very well proved by Prof. Brenda Beck's *The Three Twins*. Beck apparently did not begin with any Hookian hypothesis—as a matter of fact, she does not seem to be even aware of Hook's brief study—but she nevertheless comes very close to the Hookian concept of a "literary area." The difference, if any, is that while Hook compares Indian classical epics with the famous epics of neighboring South and Central Asian regions, Beck concentrates mainly on Tamil and such pan-Indian epics as *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*.

The Three Twins begins with an Introduction in which the most important issue concerning the growth of an epic receives a scholarly treatment. Beck describes the circumstances in which a legend or a short ballad can grow into an epic. "To become an epic", she writes, "a legend must become embroidered with a wide array of cultural and mythological motifs . . . Indeed the appeal of an epic lies mainly in providing a skillful blend of historic realism with the poetic refinement of several tellers' active imaginations."

Chapter one delineates the general features of Indian epics. Beck, for instance, emphasizes four of the most important aspects of Indian epics: (i) Indian epics lack father-son struggles; (ii) Indian epics have close association with ritual performances; (iii) Indian epics are built around a set of brothers; (iv) the heroes and heroines in Indian epics are divinized at their death. In order to sustain these conclusions, Beck also leans heavily on *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* themes.

This is followed by a comparison of folktale themes with epic patterns. It is here that some important issues regarding Indian culture and the bardic lore are raised. For example, if sibling rivalry is absent in Indian oral epics, but prominent in folktales, the author has not explained this phenomenon of presence and absence. In the first place, speaking structurally, an important theme in a given culture usually finds its way into the important genres of that culture. It would be unbelievable, for example, to find the theme of child marriage confined to Indian proverbs only and not present in epics or oral narrative. However, there is a possibility of a theme not gaining prominence in a particular genre as Beck has rightly pointed out. For example, sibling rivalries have less prominence in Indian epics because the epic is an idealized genre, while the folktale is not. The epic serves as a model, just as *Rāmāyaṇa* does in Indian society even today; therefore the idealizing of relationships and themes becomes an important quality of any epic, more so of a national epic.

The Chapter Three of *The Three Twins* deals with the ritual dimensions of the story. Ritual has, and still remains, an inseparable aspect of South Indian epic traditions. Beck has analyzed the ritualistic aspects of this popular Tamil epic in a highly sophisticated manner. The chapter on Oral Performance is equally interesting. Here the discussion on formulaic structure, dictation, performance, rhythm, meter and tempo, prose style etc. of the epic is inspired by the pioneering works of Milman Perry and Albert B. Lord on Yugoslav oral poetry. The chapter also provides a reader with neatly drawn musical notation charts of some portions of the epic.

The chapter on Story Structure of *The Three Twins* is simply marvellous. Here Beck is guided by two considerations: (i) she successfully applies her anthropological

insights to a piece of folklore and thus carries out scientific operations on the text of a type that folklorists normally do not venture to do; (ii) in applying this insight she certainly is guided by structuralist thought, but she is very careful not to allow it to drift to extreme and become a mere fashionable label. Her structural approach, therefore, is very cautious but convincing as far as the social structure, kinship system and the symbolism of color and categories are concerned. And she maintains this balanced approach throughout this chapter while covering all important aspects of the story structure of this epic.

The Chapter on Actions and Events is mostly devoted to comparison of important actions and events of *The Three Twins* with pan-Indian classical epics. Beck compares kingly deportment, the role of animals, the women characters, dicing games, social hierarchy, political geography and other important aspects of the epic with *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* and concludes that "the Brothers Story [*The Three Twins*] builds on much that is pan-Indian. Yet it adds some unique twists to basic themes. The fresh perspective it provides on familiar materials lends this account much of its regional flavor."

Again in the chapter on Moral Principles, Beck deals with the world-view presented in the epic. Here also Beck's comparison of the basic elements of the world-view presented in *The Three Twins*, *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* is full of anthropological insight and thereby provides more or less a general outline of Indian world-view itself. However, Beck's comparison here as elsewhere, is not guided by any *a priori* formula. It is not only similarities that Beck is interested in or attempts to seek in comparisons—on the contrary, she emphasises dissimilarities equally well. Consider the following:

The two epics [*The Three Twins* and *Mahābhārata*] differ in their views of the cause of strife and jealousy. In the *Mahābhārata*, the roots of conflict are very personal. Though grounded in half-brother relationships or in agnatic cousinhood, the specific annoyances that lead to confrontation lie in individual character attributes. In the Brothers story, however, none of the major confrontations stem from personal grievance. Here men are rivals because of their social or structural positions. Cousins who belong to the same lineage want the same parcel of land. Forest dwellers and farmers, as well as artisans and farmers, are opposed in principal. They want rights to the same goods. In this sense one can say that the *Mahābhārata* has a more-individualized and the Brothers story a more-sociological, view of causation (p. 169).

The final two chapters, Metaphors and General Comparisons and the Conclusion, are devoted to certain shared cultural views of Indian society. Caste and Varna contrasts as they appear in bardic accounts have been analyzed with depth. Similarly the theme of reincarnation—an important theme in Indian folklore—has been discussed at length. Beck systematically discerns the underlying patterns of these basic themes, which often get inverted in bardic lore. In her conclusion Beck says, "an epic is a superstory," and I would like to add that *The Three Twins* is a superbook.

REFERENCE CITED

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