

# Book Review

*Indian Asceticism: Power, Violence and Play*

By Carl Olson

Oxford: Oxford University Press

2015

Reviewer: Garth Mason

Department of Religious Studies and Arabic

University of South Africa

*Indian Asceticism: Power, Violence and Play* by Carl Olson is a study of asceticism in relation to manifestations of power in Indian religion. Olson argues that the familiar theoretical approaches to understanding power of via phenomenology and post-modernism are not helpful in gaining an understanding of power as exhibited by Indian ascetics. In this book Olson argues that power manifested by Indian ascetics must be understood as a disruptive event associated with violence, the demonic, play, comic, erotic, performance of miracles and healings. Ascetics unsettle the normal in both the personal and social aspects of life by what Olson refers to as the ‘feeling of the uncanny’. According to the author the power exhibited by Indian ascetics incorporates experiences of strangeness and the mysterious. The ‘weird’ (author’s term) ascetic displays of ascetic power is fashioned in liminal spaces of social expression and narrative in Indian religion. The very oddness and incongruity of ascetic power is, however, what sustains its role in Indian society via the need to continue returning to its unfathomability.

*Indian Asceticism: Power, Violence and Play* provides detailed descriptions of different forms of power in Indian asceticism. The majority of the book is concerned with description and analysis of representations of power in Indian religious and philosophical texts. This perhaps is a weakness in that the book would have benefitted from more empirical research and analysis, particularly because Olson argues that power is to be understood as a social

disruptor. Nevertheless, *Indian asceticism* offers a useful literary analysis of representations of power from a broad range Indian religio-philosophical texts. Entire chapters are devoted to separate foci of power; violence and the demonic, language, the erotic and the miraculous, including play.

Olson considers ascetic power from an inclusive range of Indian traditions from the orthodox to unorthodox. Asceticism is analysed in the *yoga sutras*, the *Puranas*, *tantras*, Jain texts written by sages such as Samantabhadra and texts from the Buddhist Pali tradition. Unfortunately the textual analyses tend to be too unstructured. Olson would have benefitted from a more coherent analysis around definite foci. The result one is left with is a sense meandering through religious texts for references to asceticism. Too often I wanted the points raised to be further developed. For example, at the conclusion of the section of fasting and violence, Olson remarks, ‘violence manifests something that is ontologically complex, which ‘turns it analytically evasive and socially extremely ambiguous’ (94). Such tantalizing comments are frequent in the book, but left frustratingly undeveloped until the last chapter. The over-emphasis on descriptive detail in the body of book undermines the possibility of a clear line of argument developing through-out the breadth of the study. As a result for much of my reading of the book I was intrigued by the observations but confused as to Olson’s overarching intent. While the reader may be discombobulated by the rich array of textual reference to power in asceticism, I maintain that Olson’s structural strategy is revealed early in the text. Olson observes in the opening paragraph of the preface ‘over the centuries, Indian ascetics have been enduring and ubiquitous features of Indian culture with respect to the religious paths of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Their strange habits, physical appearance, ways of communicating, and modes of thinking have fascinated ordinary people and scholars’ (ix). His intention from opening gambit is to ‘play’ on the othering process and this sense of the ‘otherness’ of Indian asceticism is maintained throughout most of the text. Had the theoretical Chapter 8 – *Power and theory* been placed after the introductory chapter the sense of othering, on which the book attempts to promote the idea of power as a ‘feeling of the uncanny’ in relation to asceticism, would have been dismantled. Sadly Olson’s keeps his literary analyses too rooted in the sense of the mysterious and inexplicable for the book to offer much academic value in understanding the role of power in Indian asceticism.

My argument is that Olson purposely keeps from the reader his actual argument. This may provide theatrical effect but undermines the academic

quality the book. Most importantly, the favouring of theatre over analysis obfuscates rather than clarifies in the early chapters what Olson means by power and other key terms.

As a whole the book *Indian Asceticism: Power, Violence and Play*, is an exercise in patience, where it need not have been. My suggestion is that Olson's book provides a useful contribution to a literary analysis of various representation of power in Indian asceticism if individual chapters are read separately. They could provide entry points to further in-depth study of primary Indian religious texts. The book also provides good subject matter for post-colonial studies if read as a good example of how textual othering is maintained in Eurocentric texts on Indian religions.

