



Beatrix Hauser

Promising Rituals: Gender and Performativity in Eastern India

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reviewed by [Ishita Shruti](#)

1. How do women of traditional societies make sense of self, by performing religious rituals? Do these rituals in some way constrict women's agency or provide space for 'bargaining' in a patriarchal setting? These are some central questions which Beatrix Hauser seeks to answer in her book *Promising Rituals: Gender and Performativity in Eastern India* (2012). In this book, Hauser is more interested in exploring women's perception of power and human agency and self images. She analyses how regular participation in rituals construct or reconstruct women's understanding of self (a gendered self). One of the main arguments conveyed in the book is that performance in religious rituals (a cultural site in the case here) produce 'encouraging notions of femininity,' which help women in verifying their self-understanding as gendered beings. The book is based on an ethnographic study in the city of Behrampur and its rural surroundings of Southern Orissa, a state located on the eastern coastline of the Indian sub-continent.
2. Hauser has produced a solid theoretical base for the book and taken a 'subaltern' path in analysing many theoretical discourses. For example, she does not imply a 'western' notion of power that is 'domination' but analyses 'discursive power' and focuses on women's views on power. She stresses that traditional Indian society, especially in the regions where worshipping goddesses are common, women draw a sense of self esteem through various religious rituals. Therefore, in this context the notion of 's(h)akti' is more relevant, which does not mean subjugation or domination but also denotes 'potentialities' and 'tolerance.' She draws her concepts on gender from Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman. In that sense gender becomes a social construct and not a 'passive being.' The process of gendering, then, does not only mean everyday actions in which actors may or may not get involved cognitively but also 'framed events' such as rituals, processions and festivals. The book has a major focuses on 'performances' of religious and other rituals.
3. The book contains eight chapters and each chapter discuss different aspects of ritualistic performances relating to 'doing gender.' While analysing each religious, semi religious events and performances of the actors in the events, Hauser, tries to make sense of how the somatic and emotional experiences during the events stays with the actors even after their completion. For example, in the first chapter, she conducts an analysis into a religious event called 'Jahni Osa': a day-long fast which adolescent girls keep in the hope of getting a good husband when they get married. But Hauser goes into deeper analysis of the religious event and completely negates the 'hegemonic' perspective of female passivity on such practices. She claims that adolescent girls in

Southern districts of Orissa negotiate their social space by performing this votive rite. These girls get the first taste of 'gender specific ritual agency' after performing the fast.

4. The second chapter deals with a seemingly new religious event which does not have the backing of religious texts and scriptures—*Nisa Mangalabara Osa*—conducted for the well-being of husband and family. The chapter, thus, brings forth women's religious agency in a more direct way as it allows women autonomy to 'design the worship.' Hauser has conceptualised this process as 'personalisation of worship,' which, according to her does not denote authorship or individualisation of religious events, but it authenticates rituals for the participants by personifying various emotions and tensions.
5. The third chapter of the book focuses on the everyday performativity of women and how their everyday practices shape/reshape their self understanding. Here, Hauser draws her attention to a non-religious practice, menstruation and analyses how social and cultural meanings attached to this bodily function, which is considered to be an 'impure' period in women's lives, help in gendering the everyday life practices of Hindu women. She bases her analysis within the discourse of the 'performative category' and explains that the everyday self-presentation of women, which is permanently defined with some variations, produces the notion of 'purity' or 'impurity' in their social and religious lives.
6. This is not to undermine women's agency in displaying new ways of conveying ritualistic restrictions or coping with somatic experiences of menstruation, but in this case, women cannot be regarded as an 'autonomous author' of this process, Hauser concludes.
7. The next two chapters (4 and 5) are devoted to socio-religious practices of 'divine possession.' By examining the process and socio-psychological dimensions of the 'possessions,' Hauser dismisses the existing academic discourse on divine possessions in South Asia, which regard women as 'passive victims' of these religious practices. She states that though the enactment of 'possession' is physically tiring, it raises the 'reputation of women' in their surroundings and is rationalised as 'divine agency.' According to Hauser, these 'bodily experiences' are culturally constructed and evoke 'real experiences' as women afterward identify and acknowledge the 'deity presence' in their body.
8. The last three chapters document and analyse religious fervour around *Burhi Thakurani Yatra*. Chapter six focuses on the prominent role of women in the festival. It also explores how women, who are otherwise absent from public spaces in the night, appropriate these spaces in the night when they conduct nocturnal *yatra* or processions. Also, this public event is in contrast with private ritual practices conducted by women in the private spheres of the home. Chapter seven of the book, for the first time, brings forth men's involvement in religious events when Hauser discusses masquerading performances by men to please the Thakurani goddess. She explains how, like women's processions at night, masquerading is a transcendental experience for men where they are believed to be completely immersed in their different roles to attain a devotional high. Chapter eight still remains with *Burhi Thakurani Yatra*, but focuses more on communal politics around the *yatra* and how women, once again, either get involved in communal politics or become subjects of such politics.
9. Hauser presents a rich ethnography in the book and provides a 'thick description' of the religious and ritualistic lives of women of Southern Orissa. However, such rich ethnography calls for a much deeper analysis into various aspects which influence 'doing gender.' For example Hauser made a fleeting statement in chapter four about the class-specific practices of divine possessions; otherwise, she has considered 'women of southern Orissa' as a single category in her analysis—a deeper analysis of middle-class women of Southern Orissa would have made the book even more intriguing. Further, Hauser has given sufficient attention to women's agency (ritual agency, divine

agency), however, she does not explain in great detail how that agency is being reshaped in the changing politico/economic space created by globalisation and liberalisation. A detailed analysis of the influence of media on women's religiosity would have enhanced Hauser's analysis. Further, in her ethnography, she has stressed that religious performances in Southern Orissa are a source of self esteem and confidence for women, who do not get any external reinforcements (such as paid employment). However, with such rich data one would expect a little more on the ways that women bargain their space by 'being religious and pious.'

10. The book is a good resource for social scientists, particularly sociologists and anthropologists, in general and feminists and gender researchers in particular. This is also a good read for students willing to take up ethnographic research.

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