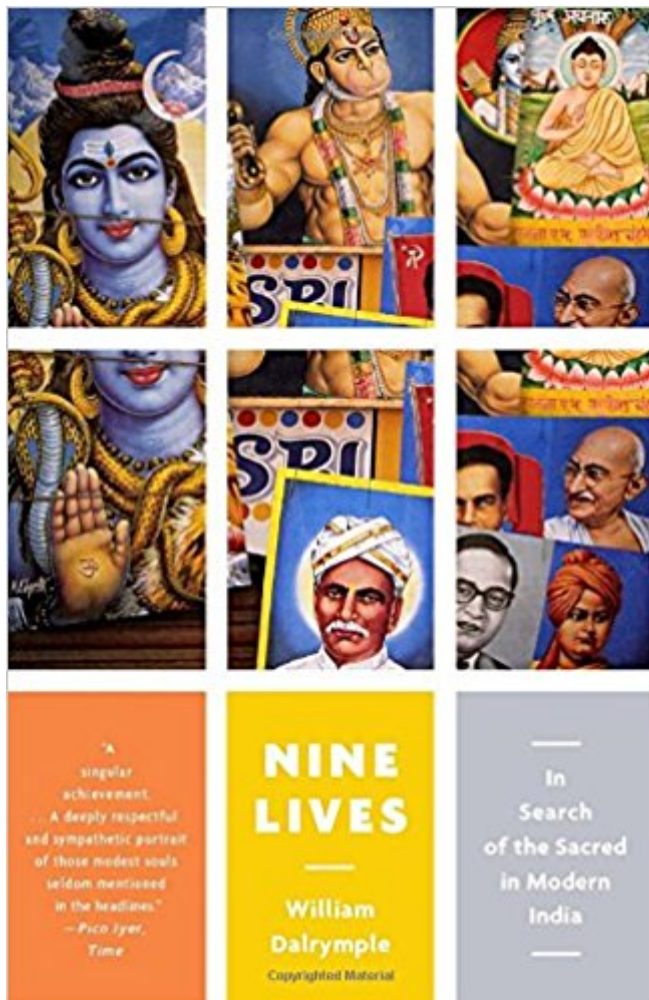


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Nine Lives: In Search Of The Sacred In Modern India (Vintage Departures)



Synopsis

From the author of *The Last Mughal*, an enlightening book that explores with remarkable compassion and expansive insight nine varieties of religious devotion in India today. In portraits of people we might otherwise never know William Dalrymple distills his twenty-five years of travel in India to explore the challenges faced by practitioners of traditional forms of faith in contemporary India. For two months a year, a man in Kerala divides his time between jobs as a prison warden and a well-builder and his calling as an incarnate deity. A temple prostitute watches her two daughters die from AIDS after entering a trade she regards as a sacred calling. A Jain nun recalls the pain of watching her closest friend ritually starve herself to death. Together, these tales reveal the resilience of individuals in the face of the relentless onslaught of modernity, the enduring legacy of tradition, and the hope and honor that can be found even in the most unlikely places.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Historian-travel writer Dalrymple (*The Last Mughal*) knows his Asian subcontinent, having moved to New Delhi in 1989. The engine of Indian economic development is bringing rapid change, and Dalrymple spotlights changes and constancies brought about in India's dizzyingly diverse religious practices. The titular nine lives are those of a variety of religious adherents: a Jain nun, a sacred dancer, a Sufi mystic, a Tantric practitioner, among others. His subjects, for the most part, do their own show-and-tell in explaining their religious paths, which differ but share the passionate devotion (bhakti) that characterizes popular religion in India. Dalrymple has a good eye,

a better ear, and the humility to get out of the way of his subjects. It helps to know a bit about the subject coming in, as it saves endless flipping to a very helpful appended glossary. The author also notes in his introduction he has made a special effort to avoid exoticizing "mystic India," yet he has picked some extremes to exemplify different kinds of religious beliefs and practices. Still, those are minor quibbles about this ambitious and affectionate book that respects popular religion.

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Dalrymple, author of prizewinning works of far-roaming inquiry, including *The Last Mughal* (2007), knows when to let others speak. Which is what he does with great finesse in this evocative set of portraits of nine spiritual seekers living across India. Nine lives that open doors onto nine of India's many arduous paths to the divine and reveal striking, nearly surreal juxtapositions between the old and the new. There's the haunting tale of a Jain nun who as a girl renounced her life of privilege and the wrenching story of Rani Bai, a devadasi, or servant of the goddess Yellamma, who was forced into prostitution as a girl. Hari Das describes what it feels like to be taken over by a god when he performs theyyam, the sacred possession dance of Kerala, only to return to his dangerous work as a prison guard. Dalrymple sets each vivid profile within an intricately drawn history of the ancient and now-endangered tradition each devotee is dedicated to preserving in the escalating battle between holiness and hustle that is transforming India. --Donna Seaman --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Highly interesting, wonderfully researched, beautifully written, as are all of this author's works. A main question seems to be whether often-isolated, syncretistic, devotional religious practices will continue in the face of India's burgeoning economy and, presumably, growing secularism and consumerism, on the one hand, and the exclusionary fanaticism of a militant segment of Hindus and Muslims, on the other. While much will be gained by greater educational opportunity and a higher/healthier standard of living for the rural and urban poor and powerless, rich, curious, sometimes bizarre religious practices in the name of the gods will probably fade away. This book is not about mainstream religious practices or faiths of the great religions --- or even of "smaller traditions" that have gained acceptance, if not understanding, because of their great age. The "Sacred" referred to in the title are approaches to gods/God that are, for all the integrity of those interviewed who practice them, mightily strange. The book certainly shows that devout, faithful approaches to belief are common to all levels of people and a belief in a "greater power" is

sustaining in the most difficult of situations. The book is a wondrous "read" about good people whom most of us will never otherwise hear.

I read this book in India about a year ago while on vacation. Since I write about India in my own fiction I often hope to pick up more insights from other writers. Dalrymple is one of my favorite writers, and this is one of my favorite books. The author explores the lives of nine individuals who have given their lives in one way or another to the pursuit of the spiritual and the sacred. The first one of the lives he explores is that of a Jain nun who struggles with the loss of her companion and contemplates suicide. That last person he interviews is a Baul, a member of a Bengali caste that has rejected the rigid life of Indian society. For over 500 years the Bauls have wandered the country, mostly North India and Bangladesh, singing their songs and living outside acceptable society. The man the author interviews is a blind Baul singer who talks about his life as a devotee. Especially moving is the story of a Buddhist monk who leaves Tibet during the invasion of the Chinese in 1954 and in India confronts his own prejudices and thinks deeply about what it means to be a devotee. This book moved me as few others have.

Read the book out in a weekend - was glad the author took the time to document several people who follow various religious paths in danger of being submerged by the homogeneity of the larger organized religions like Wahhabi Islam and orthodox Hinduism. While I was grateful that those interviewed shared their life stories all of which evoked more than a touch of pathos; I wondered about Mr Dalrymple profiting off them, but acknowledge a more respectful attitude towards those he encountered compared to his first book- *In Xanadu*- which I also enjoyed. A couple of the stories illustrated how the rigid, strait-laced Indian society fostered the extremes that people would go to express themselves- in the first and last stories, children of well-to-do families rejected the conventional 'safe' path for the unknown- one embracing celibacy, although supposedly practising non-attachment, was devastated when the companion of 20 years died- and the other engaging in tantric-like Baul practices. Published in 2009, it documented well the devastation of HIV/AIDS on one family forced to continue in prostitution under the 'tradition' of dedicating the young girls to Yellamma/becoming devadasis - applicable to pre-Mughal India, certainly not 21st century 'Shining India'! The book was very informative about Sufism and illustrated well the devastation Partition had on the lives of ordinary Indians. The story about the Idol-maker reminded me of the part in Anil's Ghost where the final part of installation of the eyes is very sacred, but sadly that tradition is also under threat of the Mass-produced market. Interesting and informative too was the fact that the

erotic images/sculptures on the Khujharo temples were illustrating Tantric practices prevalent when the temple was being built.

A fascinating, superbly written book about the variety of religious paths followed by nine different Asian Indians. This is not a book about Westerners abroad pursuing a spiritual path. Dalrymple, an Englishman who has lived in India for a number of years, is, in addition to having published several other books dealing with the subcontinent, the director of a book festival in India. He charts a variety of traditions as embodied and advanced in nine different people. The chapter on the Jain devotee, a path that focuses on self-abnegation, is disturbing to read. The young woman who is the focus of the chapter slowly strips herself of all material comforts, eventually choosing suicide as the ultimate accomplishment of her path. Each chapter presents a captivating exposition of other religious paths in India. Highly recommended for a captivating look at the present through the prism of Indian religious historical tradition.

Well researched and written. Excellent insight into at least some of India's vast philosophical and spiritual traditions. A fascinating read.

Read this as I was travelling in Sikkim, and as usual, gained insight and more love for India as I read on. This author never fails me, and I called home and insisted that my mother, who initially recommended him to me, immediately get this book and read it so we could talk about it when I returned. With gentleness and humor, perspective, respect and admiration for his subjects, Dalrymple attempts to unlock the mystery of those seeking the path less taken. His writing style puts you with him in an intimate yet non-claustrophobic way. Highly recommend if you love beautiful writing and interesting ideas.

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