India; Spiritual Threats and Opportunities in Sarah MacDonald's Holy Cow!

Paul Gifford.

Abstract

Travel writing about India often focuses on the “spiritual” nature of India, and frequently posits a contrast between the materialistic “West” and the “wisdom of the East”. This contrast is a key trope in defining India as the “Other” to the contemporary “Western” world. This construction is ambivalent, presenting India’s spiritual traditions as a potential source of liberation from the materialistic and consumerist ethos of the “West”, but at the same time constructing Indian spirituality as a direct threat to “Western” reason.

Sarah MacDonald’s recent book Holy Cow! presents the author’s exploration of India’s many different spiritual traditions. In doing so, MacDonald reiterates the ambivalent construction of India as a place of enlightenment and as the site of the potential loss of reason and sanity, a place where you will get “a good shaking. Here you will dance with death and be reborn” (17). India is, in this construction, the oppositional “Other” to the “Western” world view.

This paper will analyse the construction of India as a spiritual “Other” to the “West”, with a particular focus on the colonialist (and neo-colonialist) discourses which inform this view of India. I will argue that many elements of this construction have their roots in the period of the British occupation of India, and that they continue to serve to position India as the object of Western knowledge, for the benefit of Westerners. I will also discuss how MacDonald’s construction of her own subjectivity as a traveller reinforces these ambivalent discourses of Indian spirituality.

The inconsistency does not matter; I myself manage to hold large numbers of wholly irreconcilable opinions simultaneously without the least difficulty. I do not believe others are less versatile.- Salman Rushdie