Book Reviews
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Book Reviews

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The Games of India

This coffee-table book from Marg Publications in Mumbai, The Art of Play, Board and Card Games of India, is a colorful and informed exploration of ancient India's most popular games. Many are still with us: most notably, chess, backgammon, pachisi and snakes and ladders.

The Art of Play comprises eleven essays contributed by scholars and museum curators under the guidance of editor Andrew Topsfield, curator of Indian Art at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Each essay is devoted to specific games, their playing pieces and surfaces as well as the many stories associated with them.

The game of chess is generally believed to have originated on the Indian subcontinent. Pratapaditya Pal, General Editor of Marg Publications and formerly Senior Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, writes, "While the literary evidence is scanty, the archaeological remains that can be considered to have an association with chess do seem to push the history of the game at least to the 1st century bce." In Topsfield's introductory essay, he writes that chess was once used to teach the military arts of strategy. "Chess is indeed one of India's most far-reaching and enduring contributions to world culture. Having conquered Europe via Persia and the Islamic world a thousand years ago, it still remains--in its 15th century modified European form--the leading global board game of skill."

I. L. Finkel's essay on chaupar or pachisi, incudes photographs of the huge outdoor game board devoted to chaupar in Fatehpur Sikri, along with crystal game pieces and a velvet board intricately embroidered in gold thread. They are enduring

evidence of the fervor and artistic skills devoted to the game. Pachisi, a racing game, figures at the central moment in the Mahabharatra, where Shakuni cheats Yudhishthira out of his kingdom and his wife in the gambling game, setting in motion the epic's entire drama.

I was fascinated by the history of the game that Westerners call Snakes and Ladders. Known by its original name as Gyan Chaupar, the Game of Knowledge, it imparted the philosophical teachings of Jainism, Hinduism or Islam, depending upon the game board on which one played. Players set out on a spiritual path, landing on squares which either speeded their progress (ladders) or hindered it (snakes). The early European version of Gyan Chaupar appeared in the 1890s and was adapted to reflect Victorian social and ethical mores. The plain, numerical boards we see today are the product of the 1940s and their wartime economic restrictions. This contemporary version is a plain cousin to the philosophically rich and colorful boards of the past.

The many color photos of various playing surfaces, game pieces and wooden boxes with which to store games are visually stunning. They are made more so because of the obvious skills of the artisans who created these utilitarian items. For readers who are keen to delve more deeply into the history of games, each essay concludes with exhaustive notes listing resources for further reading. Check out The Art of Play; you will not be disappointed.

the art of play, board and card games of india, editor andrew topsfield, marg publications, 24 homi mody street, mumbai, india 4000 001. december 2006. us $66.00. www.marg-art.org 168 pages.

History of Yoga in USA

Stefanie syman's historical account, The Story of Yoga in America: The Subtle Body, is a well-researched account of Hindu influence in America. She begins with Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, whose taste for Indian philosophy is well known. She goes on through figures known (Swami Vivekananda) and unknown (Pierre A. Bernard), each of whom had great influence in their time. Who knows that Margaret Woodrow Wilson, eldest daughter of America's 28th president, moved to Pondicherry in the late 1930s to live at the ashram of Sri Aurobindo? Her move prompted a story headlined "Daughter of Wilson Turns Hindu."

Syman proceeds systematically through the hippie movement, the advent of Indian swamis in the 60s and 70s and the popularization--and commercialization--of "yoga" that we see today. Her storytelling is engaging, if at times a bit gossipy. The book is a useful read for those wanting to understand the evolution of yoga in the US and how this influences the public perception of Hinduism in the country today.

the subtle body, the story of yoga in america, by stefanie syman, farrar, straus and giroux, 18 west 18th street, new york, ny 10011. first edition, 2010. us$27.00. www.fsgbooks.com 400 pages

Roots of Our Culture

In a new look at ancient india we have Professor B.B. Lal's most recent book, How Deep are the Roots of Indian Civilization? Archaeology Answers, published by Aryan Books International, New Delhi, India, 2009. Well known in the scholarly world, Professor Lal says of this latest book that "An attempt has been made to avoid scholarly jargons." He succeeded admirably and has produced a fascinating archaeological treatise on ancient India for the non-archaeologist.

"Various cultural features of the Harappan Civilization that survived the onslaughts of nearly 5,000 years can be discerned in one way or another in the life of the common people, particularly in the countryside," writes Professor Lal. Make-up, personal ornaments, agricultural practices, cooking, bedtime stories, religion, town planning and game playing (yes, chess and pachisi!) are a few of the subjects he ties directly to ancient India. To illustrate the point, Professor Lal draws direct comparisons from social and agricultural practices of the past to identical counterparts still in use today. His inclusion of color and black-and-white photographs of artifacts and their corresponding modern equivalent provides astonishing evidence of India's 5,000-year-old culture.

Professor Lal discusses the Aryan Invasion and Aryan Immigration theories espoused by some and concludes that both concepts are false. He states that question of "which civilization flourished in this very area prior to 2000 BCE, the inescapable answer will have to be the Harappan Civilization. It is abundantly clear that the authors of the Harappan Civilization were none else than the Vedic people

themselves." For readers interested in pursuing a more extensive exploration into the archaeological evidence of ancient India, a bibliography is included. Whether you are a budding archaeology student or a curious layman, Professor Lal's scholarship shows us that ancient India is alive in the present.

how deep are the roots of indian civilization? archaeology answers by b.b. lal. aryan books int., pooja apartments, 4b ansari road, new delhi, india, 110 002. 2009. rs. 390. aryanbooks@vsnl.com 150 pages

Three Books On Hinduism

We received three books all written with the same objective: to provide explanations of things Hindu for Hindus and non-Hindus alike. The first is Chinmaya Mission's Hinduism, Frequently Asked Questions. From fundamental concepts such as the Hindu concept of God, scriptures, karma, mantras, worship and guru to a Sanskrit pronunciation guide, this little book not only offers answers to questions you may have, but also establishes a foundation from which to pursue a deeper study of the religion.

A total of 89 questions are answered, including: What is the aim of the Hindu religion? What is the role of rituals in religion? and What is meditation? These are answered simply, sometimes in Swami Chinmayananda's own words, and address common misunderstandings.

Hindu Rites, Rituals, Customs & Traditions - A to Z on the Hindu Way of Life by Prem P. Bhalla, Hindology Books, New Delhi, India, 2007, is an encyclopedic collection of questions and answers about Hinduism. This differs in part from the Chinmaya Mission book in answering many cultural and practical questions, such as about weddings, samskaras, pilgrimage, etc. Questions range from simple topics, such as why couples change their seating during the marriage ceremony, to deeply mystical queries on yantras.

The third book is by Sadhu Mukundcharanda of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha or BAPS. Hindu Rites and Rituals, therefore, mostly reflects the rituals and beliefs as expressed through this particular lineage. Many color photos illustrate the dharmic life under the umbrella of the BAPS

sampradaya. In a most profound way, this book is an homage to their guru, Sri Pramukh Swami Maharaj, while concurrently being an excellent resource for Hindu rites and philosophy for anyone. BAPS members are strict vegetarians, and Sadhu Mukundcharanda includes vegetarian recipes and cooking tips.

hinduism, frequently asked questions, the hindu culture series by chinmaya publications, 560 bridgetown pike, langhorne, pa 19053, us $7.00. first edition, august 2006 usa. www.chinmayaission.org; publications@chinmayamission.org; 110 pages

hindu rites, rituals, customs and traditions, prem p. bhalla, hindology books, j-3/16, daryaganj, delhi, india 110002. rs 250. 2007. www.pustakmahal.com; 326 pages

hindu rites & rituals by sadhu mukundcharandas,baps swaminarayan aksharpith, shahibaug, amdavad 4, india. rs. 350. 2007, 512 pages

Hindu Law

This is an academic book with an academic price--$us85 for 194 pages, no illustrations. You can, however, download it to your Kindle for $54.40--but then you can't resell it later. Price aside, we include The Spirit of Hindu Law in our reviews because it portends a new standard in American academic books on things Hindu--well researched, thoughtful, and lacking the cheap shots and demeaning remarks that still are found in publications coming even from major US universities.

Dr. Donald Davis' method is to analyze various principles of Hindu law and to see how the approach of the Dharma Shastras might inform current concepts and understanding of "law." At the outset he questions the supposedly secular nature of modern law, pointing out that theological premises regarding ordinary life are more implicit in our laws than is commonly recognized.

He does offer criticism of the Hindu system, specifically that the lower classes are largely absent from its purview. But in doing so, he seems to ignore that law at the

village level, the panchayat, encompasses all castes. This system, perhaps not fully reflected in the Sanskrit Dharma Shastras, was disrupted by the imposition of British courts. Under the court system, the poor truly were left out, for lack of money--as they are to this day.

In his concluding remarks, Davis shares what he likes best about Hindu law: that dharma is a broader concept than what is usually meant by law in the West. As he puts it, "The tradition insists that law knows no bounds, that everything in human life is part of law's scope.... Hindu law (i.e. dharma) reverses the usual description of law, as an institution that merely controls human behavior, by describing law rather as primarily an institution that makes human flourishing possible."

the spirit of hindu law, by donald r. davis, jr, cambridge university press, 32 avenue of the americas, ny, ny 10013, usa. us$85.00. first edition, 2010. www.cambridge.org 194 pages

India's Gift to the World

Swami Jyotirmayananda spends many months each year in the US, and his latest book, India's Gift to the World is the Light Spiritual, is a collection of his papers given at various annual conferences on Hinduism held here. Topics range from "Realizing Swami Vivekananda's Dream of Unity" to "Relevance of Hindu Dharma for the Modern World" and "The Media's War on Hindu Dharma." Also included are a few talks on the same subjects by Swami Dayananda Saraswati of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam.

india's gift to the world is the light spiritual, by swami jyotirmayananda, 185 anna salai, chennai 600 002, india. first edition, 2009. swamijyoti@vivekanandagospel.org 238 pages