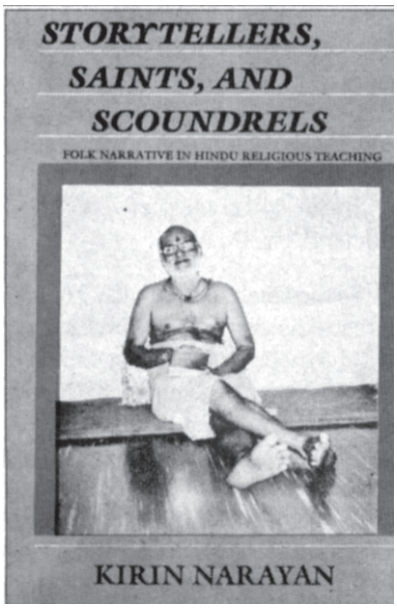

Books

Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels

Kirin Narayan

Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, Delhi, Price Rs 100 (Paperback)

Reviewed by Kiran Kapoor

THE TASK OF writing an ethnography is an increasingly difficult undertaking in American academia. In an attempt to avoid accusations of orientalism, many anthropologists have resorted to producing ethnographies that read like a compilation of the authors' enlightened views on cross-cultural analysis and colonialism. The subject of study becomes secondary to establishing the contem-porary anthropologist as a different creature from the Orientalists of the past. The ethnographies which avoid this trap but still have a solid theoreti-cal base in the discipline (i.e. not travel logs or autobiographies) are few and far between. Kirin Narayan's *Story-tellers, Saints and Scoundrels,* winner of the Victor Turner Prize in ethnographic writing, and cowinner of the Elsie Clews Parsons prize for folklore, is one such rare ethnography. Itexemplifies the recent developments in anthropological theory but the culture and characters, which are the the centre of her study, are allowed to come through in so lively a manner as to make the book interesting to scholars and non-scholars alike.

The focus of Narayan's study is the late Swami Prakashananda Saraswati. The stories he told to visitors and disciples at his ashram in Nasik provide the material for her ex-ploration of the role of the story telling in a religious context as well as the function of sadhus in the Hindu tradition. She asks: What is it about oral narrative that makes it such a compelling vehicle for religious teaching and who are these sadhus who so fre-quently utilise this oral technique?

In answering these questions, Narayan uses what she calls the "tool box" approach. She brings the "tools" of a variety of disciplines — anthropology, folklore and literary criticism — to bear on eight stories told by Swamiji. Each tale is first recounted as the author heard Swamiji tell it and then contextualised. Narayan is particularly attentive to the variety of contexts in which a story must be analysed before it can be understood. The story, "The Sadhu and his Loin-cloth", provides a prime example of her careful treatment of each tale. After recounting the story, which involves a sadhu whose attachment to his loincloth eventually leads him to accumulate as many worldly possessions as a householder, Narayan examines the interpretations of several of Swamiji's devotees. She documents how they remember the tale, how they understand the story's meaning and what situations might evoke the memory of the Swamiji's rendition. She then relates another version of the tale found in a collection of "Indian Fables" and compares the two. The analysis of the story is completed by examining it in terms of the themes it presents and how those themes correspond to themes found in other stories and themes found in Hindu religious teachings. She considers how the story's structure relates to its theme and to the structures of other tales. By situating the story in a multitude of contexts, she makes use of all her "tools" and gives her analysis a fullness that a "monolithic theoretical framework" would not have allowed.

As "The Sadhu and his Loincloth" illustrates, one of Narayan's main theoretical concerns in *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels* is perspective. She is continuously contextualising, aware that the present, historical, religious, and personal perspective all provide different pieces to the puzzle. Earlier anthropologists had often written themselves out of their ethnogra-phies, playing the part of impartial observers, capable of rendering an objective analysis. Contemporary theory stresses that the anthropologist is part of a society and will bring his or her own set of societal and personal per-spective to the study. Narayan's treatment of her own position is one of the reasons her book is so credible from an academic standpoint and personally enjoyable for any reader. In the

introduction to *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels,* she writes:

"Anthropologists have traditionally studied the Other...Folklorists, on the other hand, have tended to study their own society. My own perspective involves an uneasy balance of both folklore and anthropology, a shifting between distance and identification. Although I may be identified with the increasing postcolonial phenomenon of the..."native" anthropologist, my situation is actually more complex. I have a Gujarati father and a Ger-man-American mother; I was brought up in India but have lived in the United States since I was sixteen. Nasik...is also my father's home town. I was regularly recognised as a daughter of a local family when I started my fieldwork...Although I was partially assimilated as a local woman, I did not altogether "pass." While in Nasik I .dressed in a sari, with earrings, bangles, and anklets, my hair in a braid, and kumkum on my forehead. But I was a little too fair; a little too tall; my Hindi accent betrayed that English was my first language; and my foreign tape recorder gave away my affiliations with a project that would not concern most local women. Everyone who visited Swamiji sooner or later figured out my ties to another continent. Among his visitors was a handful of Westerners...! shared many references with many of the Westerners present, especially those who had lived in America. But even as I identified with them, I was acutely aware of the cultural faux pas they good-naturedly made and was anxious not to be lumped together with them, the "foreigners." I was perpetually trying to balance these twin sets of indentification within myself...My shifting identifications worked their way into this text. On the one hand, I am explicating what is familiar through the prism of my own sensibilities in conduction with the concepts of academe. On the other Hand, I am discovering aspects of India and the West, of people and situations, that I probably would have never known without the di-rection of a research project. Rather than discovering the exotic, this work is in many ways a deepening of the familiar."

In addition, Narayan consistently considers the perspective of her subjects. As "The Sadhu and his Loincloth" indicates, she is careful to examine the opinions of those who listen to S wamiji's tales. But she is also attentive to the opinions of the story teller himself. For instance, in her chapter entit'ed "Lives and Stories", she includes several con-versations she had with Swamiji about hisownunderstandingof oral narratives. Swamiji's opinions, she writes, "indi-cate that he has a conscious, sophisti-cated understanding of the way stories are used, reshaped, how they are assimilated into his repertoire, and how his storytelling carries forward past traditions." She does notportray Swamiji as an individual incapable of understanding his own position because he is situated within the culture. Rather, she acknowledges that an internal perspective such as Swamiji's is one that she cannot offer. Her careful reproductions of his opinions, interspersed wifh her own analysis, indicates that she considers his insights to be as potentially illuminating as her own.

Each of the chapters in *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels* begins with a story of Narayan's own making. Before Swamiji's tale isrecounted, before the analysis begins, she sets the scene by describing the people or the place orherownreactions. Irithelastchapter of her book she writes:

"On the Saptashring plateau, I presented Swamiji with my tape recorder. This marked the formal end of field work. But this was also the beginning of reflection on all that had occurred. What had I learned about storytelling as religious teaching? The questions hummed in my head as I transcribed a few remaining stories...attended an anthropologymeeting where thediscourse brought on another form of culture shock; bought ochre index cards; found an apartment where the word processor could be installed in state...As index cards spilled out of a shoebox and drafts of chapters grew on the desk, I continued to ask: why stories? When I had sat among the rapt listeners around Swamiji, the answer to this central question had often seemed perfectly clear, almost commonsensical. If I could capture that atmosphere for my readers, I thought, perhaps they too could understand the power of stories from within. Spinning stories around his stories would make my point with the same subtle persuasiveness as Swamiji himself."

This technique is indeed effective. Reading *Storytellers, Saints and Scoundrels* will be a pleasure for anyone interested in understanding the power of stories both from "within" as well as academically. The magic of storytelling comes alive as much in her own writing as in Swamiji's tales.

Women, Unions and the Labour Market: New Perspectives by Joya Sen. Mosaic Books, New Delhi, 1992.

A critical examination of labour market theory from not only an economic perspective but utilising sociological and anthropological models for analysis as well. Dr Sen argues that current labour market theories are not applicable to women as they do not recognise thedifferences between male and female workers. Keeping these differences in mind, Sen re-examines the history of capitalism, unions, and

women's unionisation in Canada and constructs a new "Barriers theory of Unionisation".

In Rajiv's Footprints, One Year in Parliament by Mani Shankar Aiyar. Konark Publishers, New Delhi, 1993.

MP Mani Shankar Aiyar's book is a tribute to Rajiv Gandhi's years in politics. It includes a chronicle of his own transition from the civil service to the political arena, as well as discussions on issues ranging from Jammu and Kashmir to new economic policies. In the author's words, "I have put together this collection of speeches and writings covering my first year in Parliament in the hope that it will encourage others to also make the transition [to politics]."

Interrogating Modernity, Culture and Colonialism in India, edited by Tejaswini, Niranjana, P. Sudar and Vivek Dhareshwar. Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1993.

A collection of essays which re-examine the notion of 'culture' and challenge the orientalist construction of what culture ought to mean in India. The book reflects the views of 13 different authors on the relationship between colonialism and the visual arts, literature, sati, aesthetics of translation, and science in the modern era.

The Ballad of Budhni, translated by Vasantha Surya. Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1992.

A114 stanza poem, which narrates the attack by police on the village of Budhni in April 1988. Originally written in Bundeli by Raghuvanshi Krishnamurti and Veerendra and Narendra Kumar, the poem is an *aalhaa* or traditional ballad of the chivalric mode which has descended from the middle Indie period. It has been transcribed into English by Vasantha Surya, who writes that the ballad expresses "the agony of rural India — a protest literature *par excellence.*"

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