Deborah Sutton. *Ruling Devotion: The Hindu Temple in the British Imperial Imagination*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2024, pp 260.

VISHNUPAL PANWAR
School of Liberal Studies, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi

Deborah Sutton's book, '*Ruling Devotion: The Hindu Temple in the British Imperial Imagination*' is a timely addition to the existing scholarship on Hindu temples, enriching our understanding of this religious institution. She strikes a fine balance between the title and the subtitle of her book by devoting equal attention to both the bureaucratic apparatus that governed devotion under colonial rule and the vast array of literature that shaped the colonial imaginary of the Hindu temple.

The book presents the temple in the colonial imagination as an evolving subject of artistic and philosophical inquiry, viewed through the lens of shifting colonial thought. The influence of Saidian thought is evident throughout, as the author critically examines her sources with an awareness of the Orientalist gaze. In this study, the Hindu temple is a colonial construct that, 'despite its familiarity, is deployed to embody strangeness' (p. 223). The book is ingeniously structured, both chronologically and thematically into six chapters, with a well-written introduction and a conclusion that situates its importance in the present context. The public discourse surrounding the *Ram Janmabhoomi* movement and the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya has fuelled contemporary political debates. The entanglement of law, politics, and Hinduism poses significant challenges for the post-colonial Indian nation-state, but as the book suggests, these issues originated in the colonial context, where they played out in the colonial judiciary. This is aptly illustrated through the case study of the Shiv Mandir in Delhi.

The chapters are further divided thematically, showcasing Sutton's scholarly ability to navigate through diverse sources with precision. Her research draws

from the archives of the 'Document Raj' (to borrow Bhavani Raman's term),[1] church-missionary records, archaeological and art- historical materials, and the private papers of leading scholars of the study involving Hindu temples.

As one of the most visible institutions in the South Asian landscape, the Hindu temple came under colonial jurisdiction with the advent of British rule in the Madras Presidency. The victory of the John Company in the Carnatic Wars provided them with the opportunity to govern, regulate, and control Hindu shrines. The first theme in the book covers colonial jurisprudence enacted to administer Hindu temples. With the provincial legislation of 1817, the Hindu temple fell under the purview of Company law. Sutton emphasises that the 'presidency government oscillated constantly between the will to innovate, arbitrate, and reorder on the one hand and the desire to merely affirm tradition on the other' (p. 56). She traces the history of initial management attempts, the embezzlement and corruption stemming from financial transactions, and the influence of Evangelical activities, which curtailed interference in temple affairs to avoid the perception of promoting idolatry. The theme of economic transactions between state authority and religious institutions, however, predates colonialism, as Burton Stein's study of Hindu temples in medieval South India demonstrates.[2]

The first chapter concludes in the 1840s when the Company's direct intervention as patrons of temples in the Madras Presidency ended. The second theme explores the work of James Fergusson[3] (1808-1886), whose interest in temple architecture and outright critique of Indian scholar Rajendra Lal Mitra reveal his racial biases. In Sutton's analysis, Fergusson's attempt to write a global history of architecture does not conceal his prejudices, as he condemns Hindu temple architecture as an 'expression of mechanistic rote and repetition' (p. 88).

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[1] Bhawani Raman argues that colonial bureaucracy transformed governance practices into a regime of paperwork. Temple governance under colonialism relied on audits, property deeds, and court records which became a rich source for historians of Hindu temple. See, Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[2] Burton Stein, "The Economic Function of a Medieval South Indian Temple," *Journal of Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (1960): 163-176.

[3] James Fergusson, *Archaeology in India with special reference to the works of Babu Rajendralal Mitra* (London: Trübner and Co., 1884).

Another theme focuses on colonial archaeology, particularly the 1904 Ancient Monuments Protection Act (a continuation of the 1863 Religious Endowment Act), which sought to "monumentalise" the Hindu temple as a site requiring colonial protection. The author examines the impact of this act through case studies of temples in the Bengal Presidency (Orissa). By incorporating regions like Madras, Bengal, and Delhi, Sutton not only highlights regional nuances but also weaves a pan-Indian history of Hindu temples under colonial rule. Though by overlooking temples in Punjab and the North East, where anti-colonial resistance took different from the regional imbalances in the book becomes more evident.

The book adeptly illustrates challenges to colonial legislation, where the "temple public"[4] resisted, negotiated, and thwarted colonial attempts to sanitise urban spaces around Hindu temples. Drawing from the case study of the Shiva temple in Delhi, Sutton shows how, during the nationalist movement, the Hindu public manoeuvred to reclaim public spaces as sites of divine presence, thereby challenging colonial authority.

Sutton enriches her work by incorporating literary fiction, poetry, magazines, and pamphlets published in nineteenth-century Britain as historical sources. Victorian literature's fascination with "things Oriental" is critically analysed through the works of writers like Rudyard Kipling and E. M. Forster. While temples appear sporadically in their writings, the imagery they created shaped English readers' perceptions of Hindu temples.[5] Sutton poignantly captures the shift in their portrayals, noting Forster's greater sensitivity compared to Kipling's. Through these writers, she explores 'the life of the Hindu temple as a space of erotic and sensual danger' (p. 160). The Hindu temple of the colonial imagination is best described as a 'literary creature' through which colonial entitlements were examined.

[4] Deepa Reddy and John Zavos, "Temple Publics: Religious Institutions and the Construction of Contemporary Hindu communities," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 13, no. 3 (December 2009): 241-260.

[5] In her classic study of English Literature, Gauri Vishwanathan shows how literature shaped colonial governance. The representation of Hindu temples in colonial literature helped reinforce the secular versus sacred binaries in colonial policy. See Gauri Vishwanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary study and British rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

The final theme pays tribute to Czech-born Austrian art historian Stella Kramrisch (1896–1993) and her lifelong fascination with Indian art, exemplified in her two-volume classic '*The Hindu Temple*' (1946).[6] Sutton examines Kramrisch's contribution to Hindu temple studies, emphasising her view that temple architecture cannot be separated from devotion; devotion is intrinsic to its aesthetics. Sutton builds on the work of anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1981), who demonstrated colonial law's intervention in the religious sphere despite claims of neutrality,[7] and historian Ishita Banerjee Dube (2001), who elaborated on this in her study of the Jagannath cult in Orissa.[8]

While Sutton focuses on the "colonial imaginary" of the temple, she also deftly captures the agency of the colonised, whose 'authority the colonial state could neither reconcile nor control' (p. 224). As the author illustrates, colonial discourse reconfigured the very idea of the Hindu temple, framing it as a dynamic and contested concept. Yet the use of the definite article 'the' risks essentialising this shifting notion, inadvertently reinforcing a singular, static conception rather than reflecting its historical and ideological evolution. '*Ruling Devotion*' overlooks the active role of caste and gender dynamics in shaping colonial legislation regarding Hindu temples.

Even in the case of the Swayambhu Shiva temple, subversion is presented as a monolithic Hindu public act. Nowhere is this clearer than in the omission of *devadasis*—ritual specialists whose livelihoods were criminalised through alliances between colonial moralists and elite reformers. This gap obscures how colonial 'governance' weaponised gender to reconstitute Hindu traditions, a process critical to understanding the very 'imperial imagination' Sutton interrogates.[9] The absence of Dalit temple entry movements—a significant struggle against caste oppression in the 1930s—is another notable gap. These movements challenged restrictions on temple entry in public

[6] Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple* vol. 2 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1976; orig. pub. 1946).

[7] Arjun Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict under Colonial rule: A South Indian Case* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[8] Ishita Banerjee-Dube, *Divine Affairs: Religion, Pilgrimage, and the State in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2001).

[9] Devesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

forums and colonial courts, marking the temple as a site of resistance not only against colonialism but also against systemic Hindu social hierarchies. This omission remains a major lacuna in an otherwise comprehensive work. Despite this, '*Ruling Devotion*' engages with diverse themes and offers valuable insights into the imperial imagination of the Hindu temple. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the study of Hindu temples.

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