



**Indo-European Studies
in Politics and Society**

edited by Klaus Voll and Uwe Skoda

Band 5

Power Plays.

Politics, Rituals and Performances in South Asia

Lidia Guzy & Uwe Skoda (Eds.)

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There are hardly any major international events that do not influence internal political processes and local societies. States, transnational organisations as well as other actors are affected in various ways by changes occurring elsewhere. In fact, they are often entangled in complicated power configurations and shifting webs of mutual dependence.

This series attempts to highlight and analyze multi-layered historical, contemporary and potentially future developments, encouraging novel and interdisciplinary viewpoints. Studies on a macro level, i.e. on inter- or transnational systems, structures and contexts are as much supported as detailed, in-depth micro-level research – ideally being based on or combining political, anthropological and / or sociological perspectives. Although globally oriented, a major focus of IESPS lies in Indo-European relations and developments in South Asia. However, we also envisage significant studies and analyses with international and global relevance in Europe itself.

The *Schriftenreihe* or series was initiated in 1976 by Dr. Werner Pfennig and Dr. Klaus Voll, both teaching at the Otto-Suhr-Institute (OSI) of the Freie Universität Berlin in various capacities for over 30 years. Because of our relation to Berlin and the Freie Universität, where Dr. Uwe Skoda also taught earlier, it was known as *Berliner Studien zur Internationalen Politik and Gesellschaft* until 2008. Also in its present avatar as IESPS we wish to continue its tradition of offering space for critical discourses and evaluations. Within our modest means we would like to contribute to a worldwide dialogue as expressed in our logo "dialogus mundi" as well as to a universally oriented thinking based on social justice. As editors we welcome and appreciate different theoretical positions. However, the responsibility lies with the respective authors.

*Uwe Skoda, Aarhus University, Aarhus and
Klaus Voll, India-Europe-Consultancy, New Delhi*

Lidia Guzy & Uwe Skoda (Eds.)

POWER PLAYS

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in South Asia**

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1 *POWER PLAYS* – AN OUTLINE

Uwe Skoda and Lidia Guzy

“*there is no action possible without a little acting*”
(George Eliot)¹

Power

Power, as the German sociologist and philosopher Heinrich Popitz (2004 [1986]: 12ff) rightly argues, is omnipresent. Yet, as he stresses, power and orders of power are never given or natural, but produced. Power is doable, practicable.² And power – also in the Weberian sense (1972 [1922]) of power as potency³ – needs justification and legitimation. These three interrelated suppositions of Popitz also set the theme for the volume: we assume a constant involvement in power plays, the everyday politics, linked essentially to performances and to a ritual sanctioning. Or to put it differently: The central question we ask here is: How is power performed ritually or in ritualised ways? How is power locally conceptualised?

In contrast to Popitz looking at power in general, analytical terms we rather concentrate on emic ideas on power and its concurrent manifestations, ritualisations and performances. We would like to address the concrete effectiveness of ritual power in relation to social power configurations as suggested by Tambs-Lyche (2004) in his study on *shakti* as an indigenous concept of the feminine sacred

¹ Quoted in Scott (1990: 1). Original in: Eliot, G. 1998 [1876]. *Daniel Deronda*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.325.

² In the German original: “Macht ist machbar” (Popitz 2004 [1986]: 20).

³ In the German original: “Macht bedeutet jede *Chance*, innerhalb einer sozialen Beziehung den eigenen Willen auch gegen Widerstreben durchzusetzen, gleichwohl worauf diese Chance beruht.” (emphasis by the editors).

power. We would also agree with John Zavos, Andrew Wyatt and Vernon Hewitt (2004: 2-3) that culture is not located “outside the political sphere”. Instead of being “inextricably tied” to the state and its institutions struggling for material benefits “politics in India has involved competition over symbolism and the strategic location of cultural signifiers – a competition over style and performance – even over what constitutes a public space”.

“local practices have power embodied in them with a logic that may be independent of a central sovereign body, and often that body to act in specific ways towards them.” (ibid: 4)

Starting from the cultural determination of “power plays” we would understand these as ritual(-ized) and often overtly performative acts (negotiations, elaborations, struggles etc.) over resources and prestige, which are dramatized by using various cultural media and often, though not necessarily linked to a divine sphere. The term also suggests an inherent contradiction between the forces and seriousness of “power” on the one hand and the much less serious, less solemn “play” on the other hand. However, it is exactly this often found combination, the “en-act-ment” of power, we are interested in.

Rituals as Performative Acts

Speaking about performances means for us to focus on rituals. We suggest that the complexity of rituals, and likewise power should be approached on the one hand through a variety of academic theories and on the other hand through applying and understanding the indigenous knowledge and value systems of the given society. As such rituals and its dynamics have become central issues in the most recent research⁴ (see: Harth / Schenk 2004; Caduff / Pfaff Czarnecka 2001: 127-148). Rituals are seen as performative texts which inscribe the values of a given society on the bodies of its members (Wulf & Zirfas 2004: 7-48). Today, rituals are considered crucial cultural practices, which can be empirically grasped by the cultural sciences. As such rituals can be read as crucial cultural expressions of local knowledge and value-systems. Rituals as cultural practices referring to superior encompassing values of humans shape one’s cultural worldview (de Coppet 1992: 1-35). They orchestrate one’s own as well as the collective’s

⁴ See: SFB 619 Ritualdynamik
http://www.ritualdynamik.de/ritualdynamik_en/index.php.

rhythms of life. In their periodically repetitive and thus complexity-reducing character they have socio-psychological effects on individually and collectively perceived experiences of crisis as caused for example, by the experience of death or collective disorder (war). In the Durkheimian understanding, rituals are rhythms of social life (Durkheim 1912) expressed in the negative cult and its functions (asceticism) as well as in the positive cult (the elements of the sacrifice), both shaping the given social structure.

In their symbolic effectiveness as Lévi-Strauss has pointed out, rituals are socially and individually powerful. Moreover, rituals can also provoke a strong ritual critique. The effectiveness of rituals results more through their symbolic paradoxes, than through any clear meanings; they operate precisely because of the belief in the effectiveness of ritual acting rather than through any reflection about the sense of this acting (Bonte / Izard 1991: 630-633). Claude Lévi-Strauss (1971) suggests studying the ritual in terms of the ritual itself as “l’art pour l’art” and, as such, ritual performances can be also approached as artistic and aesthetic expressions (we will come back to a similar idea in an Indian context below). Thus, the ritual as performative act is not only associated with the sacred sphere, but it is also part of cultural creations which transmit culture specific articulations of practices, words, personal experiences and art. Rituals conceived as performances (Turner 1986) are crucial sceneries of cultures, which can be interpreted for themselves.

Cultural Performances and Acts of Speech

In our approach we also owe much to the insights of the American anthropologist, Milton Singer (1959, 1972), who concentrated in a similar way on “cultural performances”, which he considered as “units of observation”. He uses the concept “cultural performances”

“... because they include what we in the West usually call by that name – for example, plays, concerts and lectures. But they include also prayers, ritual readings, recitations, rites and ceremonies, festivals and all those things, we usually classify under religion and ritual rather than with the cultural and artistic.” (1972: 71)

Thus, he proposes to view and analyse these events – “rituals” or religious acts, but also “theatrical performances” and we would like to include the political plays here explicitly – together, within a common framework as “elementary constituents of the culture”. In order to study them he suggests, and we follow

him here in this regard, to focus on “cultural media” such as “singing, dancing, acting, knowledge of Sanskrit, technique of dramatic recitation, and the like” (1972: 76), language itself and more specifically spoken language being the prime mode of communication. Moreover,

“Cultural specialists, ..., are distinguished according to their mastery of the different media.... Even when a performer is a hereditary specialist, his status is not taken for granted, but is judged in terms of his proficiency in the medium.” (1972: 76)

However, while Singer pleaded from early on to look beyond the social structures as relations between positions, roles and statuses and include other texts into our analysis, this did not mean for him to privilege one in favour of the other – social organisation or cultural performances. Rather,

“Performers enter into both modes of analysis, as *dramatis personae* in the performances and as real people in the social organization.” (1959: xiii).

Focussing on language as prime medium, around the same time linguists, particularly John Austin in his famous lectures “How to do things with words” (2004 [1962/1955]), had come to similar conclusions as Singer. Austin had argued that certain acts of speech do not just describe things, but create or generate something new and thereby have the potential to change the world – they perform an act and do not simply represent a social reality, rather transform it.⁵ Speech may also be acting or rather doing, depending on the social and institutional conditions of the act of speech. Unsuitable conditions may lead to failed performances instead of credible ones, but such acts are not judged as true or false, but rather as successful or failed, legitimate or illegitimate.

Following Austin’s lead, in this volume Shreeyash Palshikar looks closely at rhetorical performances in post-colonial Western India focusing specifically at the 1950s ‘*Samyukta Maharashtra,*’ or United Maharashtra movement. Taking as empirical examples two of the most popular and charismatic polemicists of the movement he illustrates the emotive and populist power of speeches and songs, but also of humour and laughter – often creating a special relationship between performers and audiences. Arousing feelings of anger or joy, rallies or public

⁵ Famously exemplified by the sentence a priest has to say in church during a wedding “hereby I declare you to be husband and wife”.

meetings were sometimes followed by mob violence (and police firings) as “emotional reactions”. Drawing “on images and symbols from common-sense understandings of Maratha history” the orators and singers, as Palshikar highlights, created and used powerful tropes and phrases, which continue to be employed in altered forms even in contemporary Marathi political discourse.

Public Performances

The close link between power and performance, particularly in acts and forms of resistance, has not only been emphasized by Lévi-Strauss as already mentioned, but has been a prime focus of the work of James Scott (1990). In his approach he built on the oeuvre of Erving Goffman (2007 [1959]), a contemporary of Austin and Singer, who had argued:

“A status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a matter of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated. Performed with ease or clumsiness, awareness or not, guile or good faith, it is none the less something that must be enacted and portrayed, something that must be realized.” (2007 [1959]: 65)

Looking at the “Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” Goffman assumes that individuals “play” the parts or roles, they are “striving to live up to”, which in effect may – like or as “masks” – become a “truer self” (54). They may be sincerely convinced of, or cynical about their performances; they may also dramatize, idealize or misrepresent themselves or their work.

Goffman understood performance not primarily as events separated from everyday life or as grand events outside a daily routine, but rather as

“... all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers. It will be convenient to label as ‘front’ that part of the individuals performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during the performance.” (2007 [1959]: 55).

Subsequently, the focus of writers such as Roland Barthes (2002 [1968]) shifted away from performers (not necessary only individuals) towards the side of the audience (or observer in Goffman’s sense) and the context in the wider sense or the conditions of the act in Austin’s sense. Barthes argued that generally the performative might be rather located in the process of “reading”, rather than

“writing”. Similarly, Heidrun Brückner, Elisabeth Schömbucher and Phillip B. Zarrilli (2007) stress – apart from part of the performers, often themselves specialized in different ways – the decisive role of the audience in empowering or judging a performance.

“What is ‘heard’ does not always correspond to what has been said. Things unsaid might have been heard, according to the individual conditions of the participants and audience.” (2007: 10)

Coming back to Scott, he looked at ‘public performances’ and distinguished between “public transcripts on-stage” and rather “hidden transcripts off-stage”.

“Subordinates offer a performance of deference and consent while attempting to discern, to read, the real intentions and mood of the potentially threatening powerholder. As the favourite proverb of Jamaican slaves captures it, ‘Play fool, to catch wise.’ The power figure, in turn, produces a performance of mastery and command while attempting to peer behind the mask of subordinates to read their real intentions. The dialectic of disguise and surveillance that pervades relations between the weak and the strong help ... to understand the cultural patterns of domination and subordination. The theatrical imperatives that normally prevail in situations of domination produce a public transcript in close conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear.” (1990: 3-4)

But, as Scott reiterates, it is impossible for the powerholders to control the stage totally. Performances may be convincing and as such successful for the powerful, yet feigned as lip service by the weak at the same time. Performances, being often multi-vocal themselves, may generate “counter-performances” (Bailey 1996: 9). Certain acts, meaningful within the primary framework, can be also perceived as something different as Goffman had pointed out earlier.

The contestation of power has similarly been stressed by Nicholas Dirks (1994: 502) who argued that as soon as power is displayed, it “is distributed to others and opened to potential contestation.” In fact

“rituals provide critical moments for the definition of collectivities and the articulation of rank and power, they often occasion more conflict than consensus, and [we see] that each consensus is provisional, as such a social moment of liminality in which all relations of power (and powerlessness) are up for grabs as a time for the reconstitution and celebration of a highly political (...) ritual order. (ibid. 488)

In her contribution in this volume Stephanie Lotter concentrates on narratives describing and explaining a case of theft of a sacred and potent *yantra* in Nepal.

Rituals offer insights into the ways social relations and power struggles are negotiated amongst members of an elite Rana clan. Lotter links the criminal case to the processes of social ascent and decline – also reflected in the ritual arena. The theft casts doubt over the proper performance of clan rituals and thus over its power and efficacy. As she argues: “The question then becomes not, ‘Who was the thief?’, but rather, ‘Who within the community will be accused and for what reasons?’” Among the accused is also the queen, whose status was elevated through marriage – hence being more powerful, yet also potentially more threatening. In a way, Lotter’s theft case also exemplifies elements of what anthropologist Viktor Turner (1982) had called a “social drama”. He understood this explicitly as a process, in which power relations are contested and such a “breaching” of norms and rules for social relations in the wider sense, of expected behaviour or a failure of performances may lead to “crisis” followed by “redressive action” and possibly “reintegration” afterwards.

Bodily Performances and Corporal Politics

As we have stressed above, the power of rituals lies in its performative character and thus in corporeal effects of rituals. The corporal and material character of rituals is hence constitutive for its effectiveness (Wulf/Zirfas 2004: 8). The power of rituals lies also in its transformative dynamics in regard to its healing functions, as Bruce Kapferer (1984 [1979]: 3-19; 108-153) highlights. According to Wulf and Zirfas the ritual effectiveness is based upon mimetic and symbolic processes. Mimetic rituals inscribe themselves on the bodies of the ritual participants. Because of these physical bodily aspects, it is evident that rituals are more than mere discourses (Wulf/Zirfas 2004: 8).

The “more” of a ritual stems from the materiality of the bodies involved, the bodily “presence” and the vulnerability of the participant bodies. The bodily presence of rituals constitutes consequently the social norms. The social fabric thus is body culture expressed through performances. By means of performances, systems of order, mostly hierarchical, are created. In systems of order power relations are visible: those between classes, generations and gender. In this sense the social totality of rituals as performances becomes visible. Rituals order everyday life and thus help to shape and create it.

By taking gender and the body into consideration it was above all Judith Butler (2004 [1988]) who considerably extended the understanding of the performative of Singer and others. She argued gender is not biologically given, but based on specific cultural constructions. In this regard she takes up and broadens the ar-

gument of Simone de Beauvoir for whom a woman is not born a woman, but she becomes a woman or she is made a woman. For Butler, gender is not a stable identity, but rather fragile, construed in time, quite often forced upon by sanctions and taboos in the respective society. Belonging to a gender is related to a stylisation of the body. The body itself may carry cultural meanings – the body may *embody* or materialize certain cultural and historical eventualities. As Butler notes:

“gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of a constituted *social temporality*. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.” (2004 [1988]: 154)

Here Butler rephrases Austin’s famous dictum of doing things with words: “One is not simply a body, but in some very key sense, one does one’s body” (cited in Fischer-Lichte 2004: 37). In her theory Butler does not just emphasize the embodiment and performance of gender, but also relates it to power configurations – neither is the individual free to choose all possible performances, nor can any society impose or determine forms of embodiment. In this way Butler’s approach appears to be not too far away from Bourdieu’s understanding of the *habitus*, which has in terms of performances a lot in common with the idea of gender as proposed by Butler.

In a nutshell, while Austin had emphasised the self-referential aspects of acts of speech and Singer had stressed the staging of culture, the notion of “performance” has subsequently – within the so-called “performative turn” (Bachmann-Medick 2007) in social sciences – been further extended to bodily performances, to corporal staging of theatrical or ritual acts – particularly in front of an audience; and furthermore to material embodiments of messages within an act of inscribing or to the constitution of imagination within an act of reading or deci-

phering (Wirth 2002: 9). Similarly, Fischer-Lichte (2004: 299) summarizes various meanings of performance under the ideas of staging, corporality, perception and representation.

A case in point, combined the various strands, is offered by Manish Thakur who looks in his contribution more closely at a group of political performers: *Mofussil Netajis* – local politicians and political brokers. He highlights how political culture is “mediated through the varied personalities of local *netajis*”, appropriating political content top-down, but also imparting it upwards. The *netajis* are omnipresent in small town India – attending important local life-cycle rituals such as weddings, celebrating public rituals etc., always around without having any proper office. Power and prestige are constructed on contacts and experience – particularly with contacts being linked to influence. This is measured in terms of performances: “If a leader can summon any state functionary to his residence, or if his one telephone call can bring the officer to oblige him/her, then it means that the leader is really powerful.” But it is not only presence which is valued, but also physical fitness or “its local version”. As Thakur states “very often, the grandeur and political stature of a given leader gets translated into his physical attributes which would always be king-like or prince-like: he would be tall, would have broad forehead and sharp features and a certain glow would radiate from his face.” Deformities are mocked at instead. Thus, power must be appropriately “embodied”.

An specific example of a theatre performance linked to power struggles is discussed by Satu Törrko. She analyses a play titled “*Boli*”. It is staged by the group Natya Chetana, which conceives its programme as much as theatre as social work. The theatre group “believes that its theatre nevertheless has an invisible impact on the psychology of the audiences.” At times performances have been followed by political actions e.g. because of the influence of another play “illegal logging has been halted, drug dealers have been imprisoned, or corrupt civil servants have applied for a transfer within 24 hours.” At other times, the performers themselves have been beaten up. And at still other times the responses might be lukewarm, yet somehow favourable as in *Boli* – literally referring to blood sacrifices.

The Power of Rituals and Ritual Politics

Rituals as symbolic actions are powerful. In fact, symbols are often more powerful than the individual. The individual subjugates himself or herself to the power of symbols which create reality. Rituals are sensual. They evoke emotions.

tions are crucial for understanding and learning. Rituals are thus aesthetic expressions, perceived through their symbolic density, and they are emotionally effective.

Rituals are regenerative, integrative and constitutive cultural acts. However, rituals can also be destructive, e.g. by destroying or punishing the individual, for example in rituals of violence. We can thus distinguish between constitutive and destructive rituals. Constitutive rituals are based upon devotion and veneration, the individual subjugates him- or herself through a free will to a superior symbolic entity. Destructive rituals are based upon the non-voluntary subjugation of the individual to society (for example, in military service or systematised torture) but also on the very voluntary participation in violence as practiced in radical groups such as the Bajrang Dal.

The central nexus between politics and rituals, “cultural performances” per se, has also been highlighted by David Kertzer (1988: 1ff) arguing that “ritual is important in *all* political systems” (2). Instead of presupposing separate spheres of politics and religion he rather followed the anthropological tradition of defining such fields from within. Kertzer understood ritual not only as a means to maintain authority or a certain status quo – rituals as legitimation –, but also to rebel against the system in the sense of rituals of de-legitimation. Rituals have, according to him, as much a “creative potential” as it has a “conservative bias”. It is defined by him as symbolic behaviour, which is socially standardized and repetitive. As such Kertzer advocates an approach to ritual that does not limit the concept to the mediation between profane and sacred without running the risk of including any “standardized human activity”. Rather, in relation to politics rituals help to “build political organisation”; are “employed to create political legitimacy”; are also used “in both defusing and inciting political conflict” and form as well as influence “people’s understandings of the political universe” (14).

Moreover,

“Ritual provides one of the means by which people participate in such [political] dramas and thus see themselves as playing certain roles. The dramatic quality of ritual does more than define roles, however, it also provokes and emotional response.” (11)

Dick Kooiman focuses on a former princely state in South India, where, “no longer free to fight one another on the battlefield, princes and chiefs ‘now attempted to best each other in the world of symbols’.” Under colonial rule princes were actively involved in a game of honour trying to enhance their own status. A

prime medium of this ‘status rivalry’ was – apart from umbrellas, elephants and jewelled weapons – the gun salute, a privilege the British tried to codify in a complex system. Introduced by the British, but quickly appropriated by the princes and as such a newly emerged cultural performance, the salutes might be seen as “public announcements to largely non-literate audiences”, but also as markers of respect, signs of rank and ritualized performances of power and sovereignty. Thus, Kooiman highlights the ways princes participated with verve in ‘power plays’ among themselves as well as with the colonizer, belying earlier British narratives that gun salutes were merely hollow gestures.

An example of a more recent interplay between rituals and politics is offered by Uwe Skoda, who looks at the style of campaigning during the last elections in another former princely state. He introduces cultural idioms – such as the “coming out” to the public – in which the political sphere is perceived; idioms that are intrinsically linked to the electoral performance. While pre-Independence state sponsored rituals have been abolished or considerably reduced in this case royalty is still involved with its subjects and democratic politics offer a means to maintain the centrality of a king, though in a substantially transformed way. Having effectively turned from minor deities into semi-divine politicians, royal politicians may prefer to convey an image of Gandhian humility instead of former splendour, yet they are also worshipped in an appropriate ritual environment on the campaign trail.

For Kertzer “symbols provide the content of ritual” and their ability to condense meaning, their multivocality and ambiguity of rituals may be particularly apt to be used in “ritual dramas” such as elections (11). Royalty in democratic set-ups commanding cultural and social capital and using it in order to play on the sentiments of their former subjects are certainly a case in point here. However, F.G. Bailey (1996: 11) also emphasised the “polysemous communicative virtuosity” in “cultural performances” – polysemous symbols might be interpreted in different ways leading to diverging perspectives between performers and audiences. Moreover, rather “integrated cultural performances” may fragment “into many performances, each aimed at a different audience, and [are] therefore unlikely to be consonant. Messages then are liable to leak into one another, their persuasive efficiency being thus diminished.” (ibid.: 11).

Divine Play, Dramatic Performances

Sharing a symbolic approach to ritual with Kertzer, anthropologist Stanley J. Tambiah (1979) highlighted two other aspects central to our volume. He under-

stands rituals not only as culturally constructed systems of symbolic communication, but also essentially as dramatic performances. Participants use different media as already mentioned in Singer's approach and the event can be intensively experienced. As Tambiah views rituals as a dramatic actualisation of society, the distinctive structure of rituals including its stereotypy and redundancy having something to do with the production of a sense of heightened, intensified and fused communication. (2002 [1979]: 238 – paraphrased from the German translation). This ecstatic element in rituals has also been stressed by Köpping and Rao (2000) calling it the “frenzy of ritual” (German original: Im Rausch des Rituals). Thus, power is not only performed, but the performance develops its own power, becomes powerful – an aspect we highlighted in the title of our panel in Leiden 2006: “Power of Performance – Performance of Power”.

Moreover, the joyful aspects of rituals, the temporary dissociating, is linked by Tambiah – particularly in South Asian contexts – to the idea of “play” as for example in the notion of *lila* signifying a play of the gods. The complexities of “plays” in holy, yet popular Sanskrit scriptures have also been highlighted by O’Flaherty (1982). Referring to the *Yogavasishta-maharamayana* text from Kashmir she analyses how god Rudra, a vedic god of storms and winds and endowed with special wisdom, “discovers that creation inevitably leads to imperfection, to the self-perpetuating desire to go on creating” (1982: 109-10). Everybody, even the god, is somehow enmeshed in a web of creations, imaginations and illusions.

“For ‘pure’ play does not remain pure for long. When Rudra acts ‘for the sake of play/sport/amusement/fun,’ or ‘for the sheer hell of it’ (lilartham), we might also translate the term, ‘art for the art’s sake.’ This same ‘art’ is implicit in the word usually translated as ‘illusion,’ maya, which may be related to the Sanskrit verb ‘to make’ (ma). Maya is what Rudra ‘makes’ (or ‘finds’) when he imagines the universe; maya is his art. To say that the universe is an illusion is not to say that it is unreal; it is to say that it is not what it seems to be, that it is something constantly being made. Similar concepts cluster together in English around the derivatives of the Latin word for play (ludo, as in delusion, illusion, and so forth) and around the word ‘play’ itself (play as drama, as swordplay, as the play of light that causes mirages, as the ambiguity and double image implicit in wordplay). These word clusters delineate a universe full of beauty and motion that enchants us all. Yet maya is often associated with evil in Indian texts, for it is the trick of the mind that causes us to become, literally, deadly serious about what begins in a spirit of play. Maya is what makes us dream, and die.” (O’Flaherty 1982: 110)

Apart from elaborating on the idea of multilayered illusions, O’Flaherty touches upon a central link between power and play. A play may have serious implications, yet power itself may also appear as imagined, illusionary and thus less threatening. Here one is also reminded of the approach of Johan Huizinga (2004 [1950]: 119), who regarded play as “a well-defined quality of action which is different from ‘ordinary’ life” and as such linked to ritual, without being necessarily “serious”.

The idea of play as *lila* is not only manifested in scriptures, but indeed enacted on several occasions. Far from being only a “normal theatre performance”, or an ordinary drama, *lila* might be rather understood as a manifestation of powerful gods in the world. Gods may become active, the divine and transcendental can be experienced, participants may witness and become part of a divine play as well as a divine hierarchy, when gods descend on earth to become “living gods or goddesses” on earth – encountered in an often charged atmosphere of ritual settings. “The divine play on earth” (see Mallebrein / v. Stietencron 2008), a *sacer ludus*⁶, goes beyond the idea of a ritual dance – it connects to and “creates a valued, but also imagined, reality” (Bailey 1996: 5).

The centrality of the aspect of play in performances had already been highlighted by Richard Schechner (2003 [1977]: 99), who defined performances as “ritualized behaviour conditioned / permeated by play.” Similarly, Tambiah stresses the aspects of excitement, competition, uncertainty and risk inherent to plays, which one also finds in rituals more generally and specifically in “power plays”. Playing may, however, as Goffman and Turner remind us, also include role reversals, rites of status reversal, or temporary break-ups of hierarchies. Otherwise marginalised groups may have primary access to the divine, but may only exercise their influence in an environment conducive for a divine play. Lidia Guzy contributes an example of the last thesis focussing in her work on the socio-religious power of musical performances in eastern India. The music, a central cultural medium of the region, particularly the music of the *ganda baja* village orchestras represents local notions of the divine – expressions of different powerful goddesses. Guzy investigates the paradoxical relationship between the power of religious performance as divine play and the otherwise social powerlessness of mostly subaltern performers. Additionally, she also looks at current processes of social

⁶ See Schechner (1988 [1977]: 2ff).

empowerment and identity formation via musical performances which are increasingly “ethnicized”.

Performative Politics

Looking at Indian politics Thomas Blom Hansen (2004) has proposed to view “politics as permanent performance” – perpetual doing, i.e. rhetoric, visibility and local practices on a more or less regular basis, being more important than a party programme or a “coherent ideology”. Julia Eckert (2003) speaks here of a “charisma of direct action”. In relation to earlier approaches within performance theory Hansen suggests:

“Political performances are indeed about constructing spectacles and media events, but it is also very much about a certain styling of the self, the movement or the cause – by the use of a certain linguistic style or conceptual vocabulary, a certain way of dressing and acting in public, etc. I suggest that we regard political performances as a certain magnified and specialized subspecies of Erving Goffman’s notion that everyday life is framed as a series of not always conscious performances and improvisations of speech and repertoires of bodily actions (...). To be in politics, in a movement or promoting a certain cause, implies engaging a certain genre of propositional speech and action designed to convince, persuade and make things happen in the world (what Austin called ‘illocutionary speech’, Austin, 1962), and to make things exist as ‘facts’ or possibilities by constant reiteration and repetition, which is Butler’s idea of the performative (...). Political performativity comprises, in other words, the construction of images and spectacles, forms of speech, dress and public behaviour that promotes the identity of a movement of party, defines its members, and promotes its cause or worldview.” (2004: 23)

In his article, Sebastian Schwecke also shows the limits of “performative politics” in India – particularly of the *yatra*-idiom employed by the Hindu-nationalist movement. *Yatras* or processions frequently encountered as parts of temple rituals and festivals have skilfully been redrafted as political tools and potent means in order to implement a nationalist / communalist agenda for example during the famous *rath yatra* undertaken by L.K. Advani and others during the Ayodhya campaign in the 80s and early 90s. However, as Schwecke notes, “the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] carried on organising yatras as a campaigning technique despite their obvious failure as instruments of electoral mobilisation after 1992.” During the rise of the Hindu-nationalist movement, he argues, *yatras* were a major technique to bind party workers and supporters to the movement. However, more recently, specifically after the loss of power at the centre, party work-

ers appear to be increasingly disillusioned. Despite having been in power at the centre core issues have not been resolved. The continuity of *yatras*, still seen as a prime instrument of mobilisation by the party leadership, is locally often perceived as “mere performance, lacking substance”. The insights provided by Hansen and Schwecke in terms of *shakhas* and *yatras* may also be tested in relation to other common political performances such as *bandhs* or *rail rokos* in other regions such as Bengal.

While the participation in and enthusiasm for BJP-*yatras* has decreased in some areas in North India, in Central India, as Alpa Shah demonstrates in her contribution, Mundas actively take part in state-sponsored elections in order to disengage with the state. Participating in this political performance is not intended to achieve greater access to the state, but rather to be left alone from other activities of the state perceived as foreign and dangerous. Instead of the “self-interested Indian state” one’s own localized sacral polity is favoured. The ritual polity, blessed by the ancestors and re-enacted annually in a festival (*mela*), ranges above secular institutions engaging in decisive politics, but might in turn be contested by factions too. Shah’s article shows clearly the valuing of a “politico-sacral institution” or an “intimate connection of the political with a sacred realm”, while the state is demonized.

To sum up, the contributions of this volume – most of them presented during the Modern South Asian Studies Conference in Leiden 2006 – all deal with “power plays” in one form or the other. They often depict empirical situations in which the seriousness and potential force of power is combined and perhaps relativized with a certain (voluntary) “dramatisation” or “playfulness”.

As David Parkin notes:

“At times drama and ceremony clarify but sometimes mystify, yet are always enmeshed in a play of power” (Parkin 1996: xxxvi)

Yatras might be seen as “mere performances”; participation in “election rituals” might be considered a way to “keep the state away”; rank and prestige might be generated amidst the smoke of guns and so forth – in all cases power is not only enforced, it is rather “en-acted”, performed and ritualized or in a word “played (out)”.

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