

SOME REMARKS ON THE CULT OF THE DEAD IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA: AFTERLIFE IN “SCRIPTURAL” AND POPULAR HINDUISM

Ülo VALK

Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore
EE-2400 Tartu, Ülikooli 16–210, University of Tartu, Estonia

As other world religions, Hinduism has its popular and intellectual manifestations. The latter could be denoted “textual” or “scriptural” Hinduism as it is based on the old literary tradition in Sanskrit which is carried by the learned brahmins who are also the specialists of rituals and take care of the cult in temples. This paper discusses some aspects of the Hinduism of villages which are compared with the “scriptural” doctrines. In January and February 1998 I visited South and Central India: the Tulu-speaking district of coastal Karnataka and some tribal villages of the Bhils in the Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh. The paper is inspired by these fieldwork experiences and its aim is to give a theoretical frame to some observances of the religious communities whom I met, to interpret some aspects of living Hinduism on the basis of book lore that had been the only available source of information for me until this trip.¹ The conclusions of this article cannot be very far-reaching, it is a preliminary discussion of a topic that needs more elaborate research.

MODALITIES OF AFTERLIFE IN HINDUISM

Hinduism is based on the pluralism of ideas which is manifested in the variety of philosophical schools, multitude of gods, different ways towards the final liberation (*karmamārga*, *bhaktimārga*, *jñanamārga*). Concepts of life after death have been diverse as well, contradictions within the doctrines approved by the sacred texts are noticeable. The varieties of the post-mortal existence of human beings are immense in religious thinking all over the world (see VAN BAAREN 1974). However, the diversity of beliefs in afterlife within the traditions of Hinduism is striking compared to the striving for coherence in other world religions. Nirad Chaudhuri has written about the Hindus that they “have been happy with wholly inconsistent views about what happens after death, and they will express any view which suits them in the context of an argument” (CHAUDHURI

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Martti Junnonaho for inviting me to the village of Belma in Coastal Karnataka and to Dr. Swaminathan Lourdasamy for arranging my trip to the Bhil villages of Jhabua district in Madhya Pradesh. I would also like to thank Prof. Asko Parpola for his valuable comments. My trip to India was supported by the Estonian Science Foundation.

1997: 152). Proceeding from N. Chaudhuri's observations I will mention the most remarkable among those ideas illustrated by the postulates of Sanskrit texts.

1) Few human beings achieve *mokṣa* which is a transcendental state beyond the earthly sufferings and a liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirths. *Mokṣa* can be attained by the grace of God but generally it requires great efforts and is not attainable by everyone: "A man who has gone from one stage of life to another, made the offerings into the fire, conquered his sensory powers, exhausted himself by giving alms and propitiatory offerings, and then lived as a wandering ascetic – when he has died, he thrives. When a man has paid his three debts, he may set his mind-and-heart on Freedom (*mokṣa*); but if he seeks Freedom when he has not paid the debts, he sinks down." (*Manusmṛti* 6, 34–35. The debts are owed to the great sages, the ancestors and the gods; "sinks down" probably means falls into hell.)

2) Some philosophical schools (*cārvakas*) have held the materialist point of view and denied the reality of life after death: "There is no heaven, no final liberation, nor any soul in another world. (---) When once the body becomes ashes how can it ever return again? If he who departs from the body goes to another world, how is it that he comes not back again, restless for love of his kindred? Hence it is only as a means of livelihood that Brahmins have established here all these ceremonies for the dead, – there is no other fruit anywhere." (*Sarva-darśana-saṃgraha* of Mādhava; RENO 1967: 171).

3) There is an archaic idea reflected already in *Rigveda* that the dead live in the world of *pitriloka* (world of the fathers, i.e. the ancestors). This concept is connected with the memorial offerings of food and water to the dead (*śrāddha-yajña*) and through the continuation of this traditional ritual the idea of *pitriloka* has survived in popular religion (LOURDUSAMY–SAHAY 1996). According to *Rigveda* the abode where the fathers dwell is situated in the highest heaven (10, 14), in the midst of the sky (10, 15), near the highest point of the sun (9, 113). In the Vedic and Brahmanic texts stars are said to be the lights of virtuous men who go to the heavenly world (MACDONELL 1995: 167).

4) The belief in the heavenly existence of the fathers later led to the concepts of paradise and hell, two opposites in the dualistic modelling of the afterlife. In *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* Naciketas speaks to Yama, the lord of the dead, and describes the world of heaven as follows: "There is no fear whatever; thou [Yama] art not there, nor does one fear old age. Crossing over both hunger and thirst, leaving sorrow behind, one rejoices in the world of heaven." (I. 1,2) Yama later addresses him: "Whatever desires are hard to attain in this world of mortals, ask for all those desires at thy will. Here are noble maidens with chariots and musical instruments: the like of them cannot be won by men. Be served by these whom I give to thee." (I. 1,25).

Hope for such blissful afterlife is counterbalanced by the possibility of the miserable existence in hell which is associated with the sufferings in this world. *Manusmṛti* prescribes topics of meditation for the ascetic: "He should think about where men go as a result of the effects of their past actions and about how they fall into hell and are tortured in the house of Yama; and about how they are separated from the people they like and united with the people they dislike, and are overcome by old age and tormented by diseases" (6, 61–62).

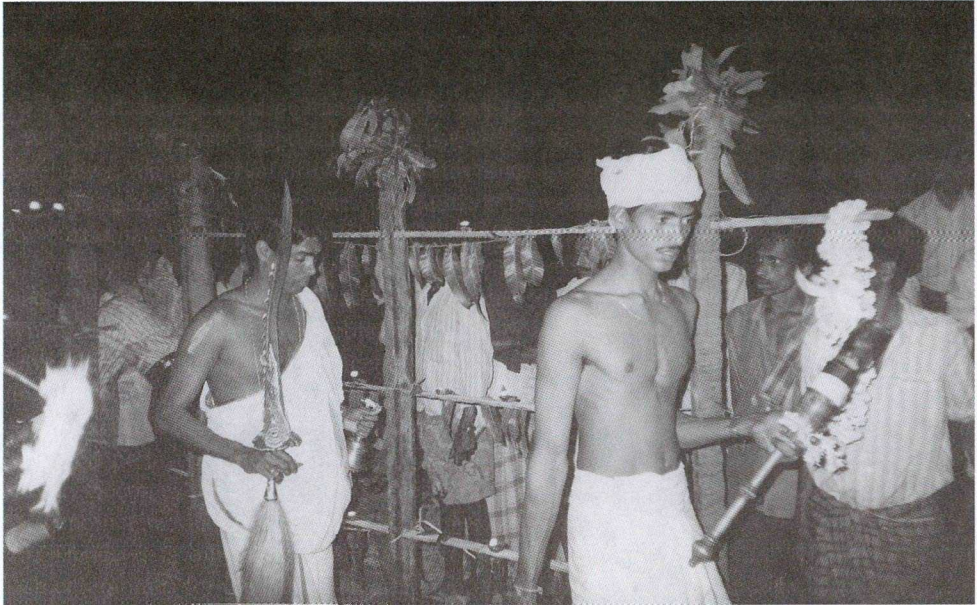


Fig. 1. Night procession towards the field temple is a part of the *bhuuta* ceremony: brahmin Gopala Krishna with the ritual sword. Belma village, Coastal Karnataka. Jan. 26, 1998.



Fig. 2. Medium Venkappa Ajari walks in the possession holding the ritual sword, bell and covered with flower garlands. Belma village, Coastal Karnataka. Jan. 26, 1998.



Fig. 3. Medium Venkappa Ajari in the state of possession walking towards the field temple and ringing the bell Belma village, Coastal Karnataka. Jan. 26, 1998.

5) According to folk beliefs known all over India some persons become evil ghosts (*bhūtas* and *pretas*) after their death. *Manusmṛti* prescribes five great sacrifices to the householder to do every day: “The study (of the Veda) is the sacrifice to ultimate reality, and the refreshing libation is the sacrifice to the ancestors; the offering into the fire is for the gods, the propitiatory offering of portions of food is for the disembodied spirits (*bhūtas*), and the revering of guests is the sacrifice to men.” (3, 70) Here ancestors and *bhūtas* make up two distinct groups.

In Indian folk religion mainly people who die violent death and for whom *śrāddha* is not performed become these malevolent ghosts who haunt at night (BASHAM 1959, 318). Christopher J. FULLER characterises them as being in a state of limbo, half in this



Fig. 4. A scene of the ceremony in the field temple. On the right hand of the medium: Sanjiva Rai, the main organizer of the ceremony. Belma village, Coastal Karnataka. Jan. 26, 1998.



Fig. 5. Memorial stones of the ancestors of the Bhils. Bhagor village, Jhabua district, Madhya Pradesh. February, 1998.



Fig. 6. A sacrificial place of the Bheels. Bhagor village, Jhabua district, Madhya Pradesh. February, 1998.

world, where they wilfully harm the living. They cause physical and mental illness, childlessness, sometimes death (FULLER 1992: 227).

6) One of the fundamental doctrines of Hinduism is the belief in rebirth which is textually attested since the oldest upanishads. The deeds of the previous life determine the quality of the next embodiment: "A man becomes a stationary object as a result of the faults that are the effects of past actions of the body, a bird or wild animal from those of speech, and a member of one of the lowest castes from those of the mind-and-heart." (*Manusmṛti* 12, 9). The belief in rebirth is approved by the most venerated religious scriptures as *Bhagavadgītā*: "Just as a person casts off worn-out garments and puts on others that are new, even so does the soul cast off worn-out bodies and take on others that are new" (2, 22; RENOUE 1967: 111).

The first concept – *mokṣa* as an immediate aim – is important for the religious aspirers and learned minority of the society. Most of the people have postponed it to the next lives. The atheistic scepticism has never gained popularity in India. The idea of *pitriloka* is nowadays reflected in rituals; as a living belief it is somewhat overshadowed by vivid imaginations of heaven and hell. The fear of the demonic dead is essential in popular religion; belief in rebirth is a distinctive feature of Hinduism which is shared both by the learned people and illiterate village folk. A somewhat surprising discordance with the last dominating view is the popular belief in the divine ancestors who constantly influence the well-being of the living and who stay in this world instead of passing on to the transcendental *pitriloka*. Both in South and Central India I saw village communities for

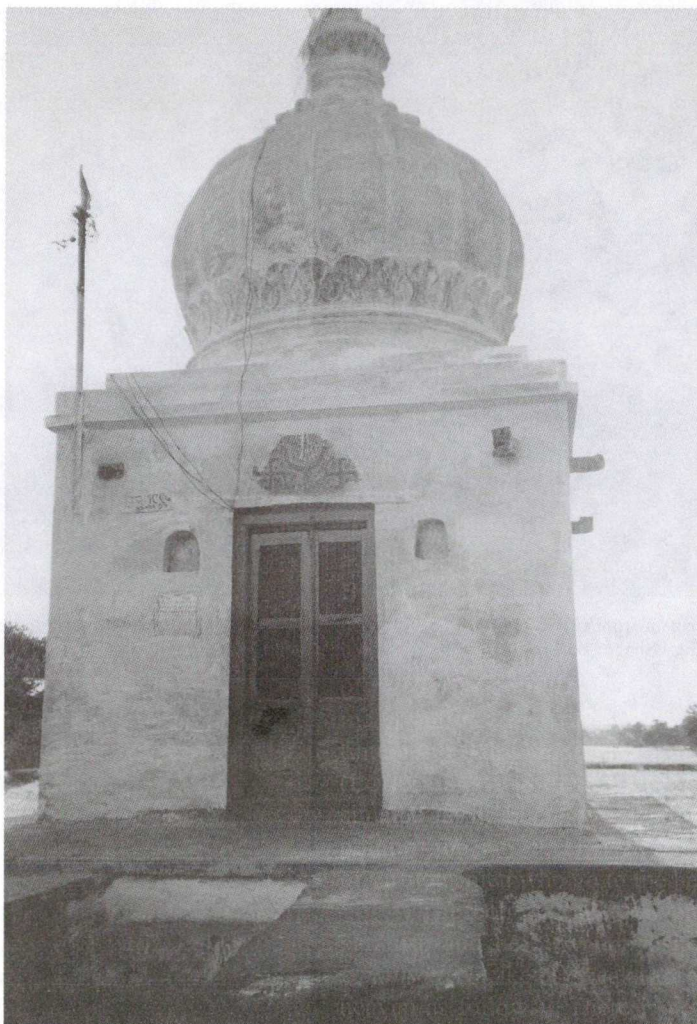


Fig. 7. A village temple in Bhagor, Jhabua district, Madhya Pradesh. February, 1998.

whom the relationship with the ancestors is of vital importance. They can bless and punish and intervene in the life of human beings. The ancestors can become physically present when they temporarily incarnate in mediums and actors during complex rituals involving possession.



Fig. 8. A Bhil man in front of the altar of the village temple. Stones represent different deities, trident is an attribute of Shiva. Bhagor village, Jhabua district, Madhya Pradesh. February, 1998. (Photos by the author)

ANCESTORS IN THE FOLK RELIGION OF CONTEMPORARY INDIA: SOME EXAMPLES

Coastal Karnataka is one of the old districts of Dravidian culture which is inhabited by 2.5 million people the majority of whom speak Tulu. Kannada has been the language of administration and education of the region, wherefore Tulu has never gained much importance as a literary language. The vitality of traditional folk culture of Coastal Karnataka is amazing: it includes folk theatre (*yakshagaana*) classical genres of folklore (e. g. epical songs *paaddanas*), old Dravidian cults as the worship of serpents (*naagas*). These and many other traditions are alive and will be certainly passed on to the 21st century without the danger of becoming extinct or marginal.

In South India the most important rituals of the villages are the annual festivals of tutelary deities (FULLER 1992: 129). In Coastal Karnataka and North Kerala village communities worship local deities called *bhuutas* (Sanskrit *bhūta*). This cult is practiced in some other parts of India and in Sri Lanka but in Coastal Karnataka it has preserved in its most complex and traditional form: it includes music, songs, dances, elements of folk theatre, processions, rituals, offerings, possession, prophecies and magical healing. The village festival dedicated to *bhuutas* lasts for several days and nights, all the castes are represented in organizing the ceremony both in the distribution of work and ritual roles of the participants (see UPADHYAYA 1996).

As we saw, in many parts of India *bhūtas* can be interpreted as the demonic dead who do not pass to the next birth but stay in this world to do harm to the living. The Sanskrit word *bhūta* is *participium perfecti passivi* of the verb *bhū* ('to be, exist'). Hence it denotes the dead beings, those who lived in the past. In sacred texts they are characterised as low in religious scale: according to *Mahābhārata* the men of purest soul worship gods; those of middle sort (passionate) worship *yakṣas* and *rākṣasas*; those of the lowest sort, whose souls are in darkness, worship *pretas* and bands of *bhūtas* (6, 41, 4 – HOPKINS 1969: 30). While *yakṣas* are usually regarded as benevolent in Indian mythology, *rākṣasas* often have demonic features. Thus *pretas* and *bhūtas* are here qualified as the lowest in rank, they are demons *par excellence*. These two classes are often associated with the evil *piśācas*, "wanderers by night". They all dance together on battle fields and in burial grounds. (HOPKINS 1969: 30–31). According to the genealogy of *Harivaṃsa* and *Vāyu Purāṇa* the mother of *bhūtas* is *Krodhā* (Anger). In *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* they are characterized as "fierce beings and eaters of flesh" who were created by Creator when he was incensed. But *bhūtas* are also attendants of Shiva who is held to be their lord (*Bhūteśvara*, *Bhūteśa*) which somewhat elevates their rank in mythological hierarchy. (GONDA 1960: 323; DOWSON 1992: 55–56).

Such religious background and the superior point of view of the Christian missionaries explains why the *bhuuta* cult of Coastal Karnataka has been interpreted as 'devil worship'. Fierce possession, colourful masks and blood sacrifices as well as the whole atmosphere of the ritual can leave an impression of the demonic cult on the outsiders but for the worshippers *bhuutas* are benevolent, tutelary spirits who protect certain families, villages or regions. U. P. Upadhyaya has classified *bhuutas* into four basic categories: 1) spirits with totemistic origin; 2) puranic deities of Hindu pantheon like the attendants of Shiva or Mother Goddess; 3) heroes who perished for some noble cause; 4) ferocious spirits of diverse origin (like human beings who met tragic death). (UPADHYAYA 1996: 201–202). The last group corresponds to *bhūtas* as the demonic dead in other parts of India. Just like in human society there is a hierarchy among the spirits. *Bermeru* is a supreme *bhuuta*, next come the royal spirits *Koḍamantaaya*, *Jaarandaaya* and others. Departed heroes like *Kooṭi-Cennaya* and *Kalkuḍa* stand next in hierarchy, followed by ferocious spirits like *Guliga*, *Caunḍi* and *Niica*. (UPADHYAYA 1996: 205). According to the oral information of Ashoka Alva, a folklorist from Udupi, more than 400 *bhuutas* have been known in Dakshina Kannada. My fieldwork experience and conversations with the tradition bearers convinced me that to a great extent the *bhuutas* are divine ancestors and heroes who are worshipped on the family and village community level.

The village of Belma is situated at a distance of about 20 kilometres from Mangalore city. It is inhabited by a few thousand people, both Muslims and Hindus. Only the latter participate in the religious ceremony which is annually held on January 24–27 and is dedicated to the *bhuutas* of the village. There are nine houses of landowners (*Bunts*) in Belma village and they are responsible for the arrangements. The main organiser of the ceremony is Sanjiva Rai, the master of Barike house where the small shrine (*gudi*) of *bhuutas* is situated. In January 1998 he was already 79 years old and thinking about a possible successor who would take over the responsibility from him. Two *bhuutas* live in Barike house: *Panjustnaaya* is the royal one, *Posa bhuuta* is his minister and thus

lower in rank. Sanjiva Rai told the following legend about the origin of the cult in his home: a long time ago *Panjustnaaya bhuuta* flew in the form of a white cock on the roof of the house, he looked around and declared to the master: "I will not leave this place, you will make a double bed for me and you. You will be my family and everything here belongs to me. The remnants of food and anything else are my property." He is the "captain" who took his assistant *Posa bhuuta* with him. The third *bhuuta* of Barike house is *Bermeru* who lives in a shrine which is about half a kilometre away. He is worshipped once a year during a special ceremony.

On the late evening of January 24 the musicians, other participants of the ritual and many people of the village gather in the yard of Barike house. The ritual begins with music and *puja* offering within the shrine. Sanjiva Rai says the secret words known only to him and the spirit enters the body of the medium Venkappa Ajari who gets possessed. Around midnight the procession leads to the temple in the field which is erected on the day before the ceremony and covered with palm leaves. Venkappa Ajari is the local man who belongs to the caste of carpenters whose role during the ceremony is extremely hard both psychologically and physically. As a *patri* he offers his body for the temporary incarnation of *bhuutas*. In the state of possession the *bhuuta* speaks through him and a part of his message to the village people is ferocious: "You live in my land, I have given all my land to you, you eat my rice but you do not worship me enough, you have forgotten me!" Thus the ceremony including prayers and offerings to *bhuutas* has some propitiatory functions. However, the ceremony is not only a religious event but also a social gathering of the village community who discuss their problems and get advice and orders from the deity as the highest authority.

M. Gopala Krishna is a young brahmin (*tantri*) from the neighbouring Munnur village who has another leading role in the ceremony. He carries through the *pūjā* offerings and follows the complex ritual as a supervisor which is the traditional role of brahmanic priests since the Vedic period. There are rituals which cannot be performed by other members of the community. (Also other ritual roles are hereditary and attached to certain castes.) The obligatory presence of the brahmin can be interpreted as the approval of the cult of *bhuutas* as local village deities from the point of view of "high" Aryan religion. It is not easy to explain the status of Dravidian *bhuutas* on the basis of the "scriptural" belief system of Hinduism concerning the modalities of afterlife. The hundreds of local *bhuutas* of Coastal Karnataka do not make up a homogeneous group but it is clear that some of them are ancestors, beings of the past in the true meaning of the Sanskrit word. They are distinct from the Hindu gods worshipped in temples and from the transcendental fathers to whom *śrāddha* offerings are brought. (For a more detailed survey of *bhuuta* rituals and their meaning see UPADHYAYA 1996, GOWDA 1996, JUNNONAHO 1996.)

Bhils are an indigenous tribal people in central India who live on a large territory in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. Their original non-Indo-European language has become extinct but nowadays they speak a Gujarati dialect, their culture and religion has been influenced by Hinduism. However, in the villages of Jhabua district I visited this influence has been relatively weak. Bhils worship the supreme god Bhagwan who is never represented in stone or wood and many other deities who have such representations, mainly in crude stones. Gods are either sanguine or clean, i. e. they either

welcome bloody sacrifices or dislike them. Most of them belong to the former group just like all the goddesses (*mata* 'mother'). (KOPPERS-JUNGLUT 1976: I, 205–206).

Bhils burn their dead and later erect colourful stone slabs as memorials for them. Not everybody is venerated in such a way but only the selected people: heads of villages and families, sorcerers, warriors. These monuments are set up in public places such as cross-roads where many people pass. The drawings on stones depict ancestors (*khatree*) on white horses, they wear turbans and festive robes and carry weapons. Usually sun and new moon considered as "witnesses" are depicted besides the ancestors whose names are also written on the stones. During the Diwali festival ancestors are worshipped at these places which includes possession: the worshipper takes himself into a trance with the help of liquor and by swinging his head. The spirit of the dead (*bhut*) enters him and speaking through his mouth names the animal to be sacrificed (KOPPERS-JUNGLUT 1976: II, 153–154). At the Diwali festival ancestors are also worshipped at home. Offerings are brought to them at the sacrifice places of stone heaps where the local deities are venerated as well. These places are covered with pots and small horse figures made of clay that have been brought here as offerings.

The cult of the dead is a characteristic feature of the religion of Bhils. While the spirits of the venerable *khatrees* are generally helpful, *bhuts* of relatives and acquaintances are often feared. Many Bhils believe that the good people remain with God Bhagwan after their death, the evil have to be reborn in order to be punished. (KOPPERS-JUNGLUT 1976: I, 226–227)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Beliefs and religious observances that are central for the ordinary people of India are not always as important in Sanskrit texts. Belief in divine ancestors and the dead who are not subject to rebirth and still do not depart to the transcendental realm does not have much support in "scriptural" Hinduism. However, they are significant in the religious life of villages in several parts of India and their cult supports the group identity both at the family and the community level.

The belief in the return and presence of ancestors (e. g. in possession) belongs to the indigenous ideas of India, it is probably a pre-Aryan tradition. Both the Tulus as a Dravidian people and the tribal Bhils stand on the margin of the Aryan culture and religion. The Bhils have actually been outsiders, only recently the Hinduist missionary activities have started among them in the villages near Jhabua and the first temples have been erected. It is possible to follow the process of integration of these local cults in "high" Hinduism (e. g. the brahmin plays one of the central roles in *bhuuta* cult).

Dynamic relationship between learned and popular religious traditions can be traced in different cultures both in a diachronic and synchronic perspective. In medieval and early modern Europe we can see the conflicts of the two which are manifested in witch trials and persecution of heretics, fight of the Church against heathendom and cult of nature. In ancient and contemporary India we can follow the constant dialogue between the "scriptural" and popular Hinduism, their interfusion is the dominating tendency.

LITERATURE

- BASHAM, Arthur L.
1959: *The Wonder that was India. A Survey of the Culture of the Indian Sub-Continent Before the Coming of the Muslims.* Grove Press, Inc. New York.
- VAN BAAREN, Theodor P.
1974: *Conceptions of Life after Death. Temenos. Studies in Comparative Religion Vol. 10, Helsinki.* 10–34.
- CHAUDHURI, Nirad C.
1977: *Hinduism: A Religion to Live By.* Delhi. Oxford University Press.
- DOWSON, John
1992: *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature.* Heritage Publishers, New Delhi.
- GONDA, Jan
1960: *Die Religionen Indiens. I Veda und älterer Hinduismus. Die Religionen der Menschheit. Bd. 11.* Stuttgart.
- GOWDA, Chinnappa
1996: *Jalaata – a Form of Bhuta Worship. – Coastal Karnataka (Studies in Folkloristic and Linguistic Traditions of Dakshina Kannada Region of the Western Coast of India).* Dr. U. P. Upadhyaya. (ed.) Udupi, 265–279.
- FULLER, Christopher J.
1992: *The Camphor Flame. Popular Hinduism and Society in India.* Princeton University Press. Princeton, New Jersey.
- HOPKINS, E. Washburn
1969: *Epic Mythology.* Biblio and Tannen. New York.
- JUNNONAHO, Martti
1996: *Perinne, modernisaatio ja yhteiskunnan muutos etelä-intialaisessa Belmassa. – Intiaa oppimassa. Kirjoituksia kulttuurista ja elämäntavasta.* Toni Mäki. (ed.) Etiäinen 4. Turku, 71–82.
- KOPPERS, Wilhelm and JUNGBLUT, Leonard
1976: *Bowmen of Mid-India. A Monography of the Bhils of Jhabua (M. P.) and Adjoining Territories. Vol. I–II.* Acta Ethnologica et Linguistica Nr. 33, Wien.
- LOURDUSAMY, S. and SAHAY, S.
1996: *The Mythological Story of Gayāsura and the Performance of śrāddhayajña in Gayā: Beliefs and Behaviour Patterns of Hindus.* Studies in Folklore and Popular Religion Vol. 1. University of Tartu, 197–203.
- MACDONELL, Arthur A.
1995: *Vedic Mythology.* Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited. Delhi.
- Manusmṛti
1991: *The Laws of Manu. With an introduction and notes translated by Wendy Doniger with Brian Smith.* Penguin Books.
- RADHAKRISHNAN, S.
1978: *The Principal Upanishads. Edited with Introduction, Text, Translation and Notes by S. R. Harper* Collins Publishers India, New Delhi.
- RENOU, Louis (ed.)
1967: *Great Religions of Modern Man. Hinduism.* Washington Square Press, New York.
- UPADHYAYA, U. P.
1996: *Bhuta Worship. – Coastal Karnataka (Studies in Folkloristic and Linguistic Traditions of Dakshina Kannada Region of the Western Coast of India).* Dr. U. P. Upadhyaya. (ed.) Udupi, 197–228.



B169615