



Poetics of Conduct: Oral Narrative and Moral Being in a South Indian Town

Leela Prasad

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Leela Prasad's riveting book presents everyday stories on subjects such as deities, ascetics, cats, and cooking along with stylized, publicly delivered ethical discourse, and shows that the study of oral narrative and performance is essential to ethical inquiry. Prasad builds on more than a decade of her ethnographic research in the famous Hindu pilgrimage town of Sringeri, Karnataka, in southwestern India, where for centuries a vibrant local culture has flourished alongside a tradition of monastic authority. Oral narratives and the seeing-and-doing orientations that are part of everyday life compel the question: How do individuals imagine the normative, and negotiate and express it, when normative sources are many and diverging? Moral persuasiveness, Prasad suggests, is intimately tied to the aesthetics of narration, and imagination plays a vital role in shaping how people create, refute, or relate to "text," "moral authority," and "community." Lived understandings of ethics keep notions of text and practice in flux and raise questions about the constitution of "theory" itself. Prasad's innovative use of ethnography, poetics, philosophy of language, and narrative and performance studies demonstrates how the moral self, with a capacity for artistic expression, is dynamic and gendered, with a historical presence and a political agency.

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