



# Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India (Vintage Departures)

By William Dalrymple



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From the author of *The Last Mughal*, an enlightening book that explores with remarkable compassion and expansive insight nine varieties of religious devotion in India today.

In portraits of people we might otherwise never know William Dalrymple distills his twenty-five years of travel in India to explore the challenges faced by practitioners of traditional forms of faith in contemporary India. For two months a year, a man in Kerala divides his time between jobs as a prison warden and a well-builder and his calling as an incarnate deity. A temple prostitute watches her two daughters die from AIDS after entering a trade she regards as a sacred calling. A Jain nun recalls the pain of watching her closest friend ritually starve herself to death.

Together, these tales reveal the resilience of individuals in the face of the relentless onslaught of modernity, the enduring legacy of tradition, and the hope and honor that can be found even in the most unlikely places.

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### **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Historian-travel writer Dalrymple (*The Last Mughal*) knows his Asian subcontinent, having moved to New Delhi in 1989. The engine of Indian economic development is bringing rapid change, and Dalrymple spotlights changes and constancies brought about in India's dizzyingly diverse religious practices. The titular nine lives are those of a variety of religious adherents: a Jain nun, a sacred dancer, a Sufi mystic, a Tantric practitioner, among others. His subjects, for the most part, do their own show-and-tell in explaining their religious paths, which differ but share the passionate devotion (*bhakti*) that characterizes popular religion in India. Dalrymple has a good eye, a better ear, and the humility to get out of the way of his subjects. It helps to know a bit about the subject coming in, as it saves endless flipping to a very helpful appended glossary. The author also notes in his introduction he has made a special effort to avoid exoticizing "mystic India," yet he has picked some extremes to exemplify different kinds of religious beliefs and practices. Still, those are minor quibbles about this ambitious and affectionate book that respects popular religion.

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From [Booklist](#)

Dalrymple, author of prizewinning works of far-roaming inquiry, including *The Last Mughal* (2007), knows when to let others speak. Which is what he does with great finesse in this evocative set of portraits of nine spiritual seekers living across India. Nine lives that open doors onto nine of India's many arduous paths to the divine and reveal striking, nearly surreal juxtapositions between the old and the new. There's the haunting tale of a Jain nun who as a girl renounced her life of privilege and the wrenching story of Rani Bai, a devadasi, or servant of the goddess Yellamma, who was forced into prostitution as a girl. Hari Das describes what it feels like "to be taken over by a god" when he performs theyyam, the sacred possession dance of Kerala, only to return to his dangerous work as a prison guard. Dalrymple sets each vivid profile within an intricately drawn history of the ancient and now-endangered tradition each devotee is dedicated to preserving in the escalating battle between holiness and hustle that is transforming India. --Donna Seaman

Review

"A singular achievement. . . . A deeply respectful and sympathetic portrait of those modest souls seldom mentioned in the headlines." —Pico Iyer, *Time*

"Not only a masterful text, but also an extraordinarily important work." —*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Fascinating and sometimes painfully moving. . . . This is the India we seldom see, peopled by obscure people whose lives are made vivid by their eloquent troubles and reckless piety." —*The New York Times Book Review*

"[This is] the age for writers like Mr. Dalrymple, who fall in with the rhythms and languages of foreign lands. *Nine Lives* shows us lives hidden almost entirely from Western readers. . . . opening up the world in a compelling way." —*Wall Street Journal*

"Informed, compassionate, and careful to place the emphasis where it belongs: on the extraordinary people whose stories [Dalrymple] conveys." —*Harper's*

“Strikingly colorful. . . . [Dalrymple’s] point—which he makes elegantly by quoting many voices—is that, as India hurtles toward modernity, it may be losing some of its soul.” —*The Washington Post*

“Luminous. . . . Consists of nine riveting and thickly reported tales of individual devotion, which together summon up a whole world and sometimes end with devastating twists. . . . Nine Lives will only enhance [Dalrymple’s] reputation.” —*The New Republic*

“Fulfills the premise that a master artist can make something very difficult look easy. . . . You don’t have to know a thing about India to enjoy this book, but when you’re done you will know and appreciate much more about its people and their various lives—of the body, of the spirit and of the heart.” —*The Seattle Times*

“Fascinating. . . . These might seem like exotic characters, but Dalrymple allows them to tell their own stories, and they emerge as deeply sympathetic and human.” —*Newsday*

“Triumphant. . . . Not only illuminates India’s relationship with religion but casts the genre itself in a new light. . . . A wise and rewarding book fizzing with Dalrymple’s signature erudition and lightness of touch. . . . The travel book of the year.” —*The Guardian* (London)

“An absolutely beautiful book, clean and honest and edifying and moving. . . . It’s a delight.” —Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*

“A wonderful pageant of believers whose stories are as much about spirituality as about society.” —*Christian Science Monitor*

“Moving. . . His nine articulate individuals are from highly distinctive and unusual milieus, and they embody the tensions and ideals of the great Indian systems of belief in personal, often painful ways. Taken together, they easily subvert conventional notions about Indian religiosity and provide an excellent antidote to much of what one reads in English about Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.” —*New York Review of Books*

“Not since Kipling has anyone evoked village India so movingly. . . . The book gives an answer to Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and those who would condemn all religions for the sake of the fanatical fringe.” —Wendy Doniger, *Times Literary Supplement*

“Straightforward reporting, clear writing and empathetic listening.” —*The Plain Dealer*

“An absorbing book. . . . Dalrymple is a lively, knowledgeable and sympathetic guide to this world of faith.” —*The Daily Telegraph*

“Exquisite. . . . William Dalrymple dazzles us with stories of how a deeper reality strokes the fire of life in the recesses of our souls. . . . By peering into the secret passages of their psyches, we learn more about our own self, our fantasies, our shadows, our longings, our hidden potential.” —Deepak Chopra

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**Janet Thaxton:**

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