

Feb. 4, St. John de Brito, S. J., Martyr of India

Gerelyn Hollingsworth | Feb. 4, 2010 NCR Today

Today is the feast of [St. John de Brito](#), [1] (João de Brito, 1647-1693), "one of the earliest Jesuit missionaries in India to adopt elements of the local culture in his evangelization".

Fr. de Brito became a pandaraswami, "an Indian ascetic who could approach all castes".

Click [here](#) [2] to see him pictured on postage stamps in various garb, including that of a page at the royal court at Lisbon.

"When de Brito was young, he almost died of an illness and his mother vowed he would wear a Jesuit cassock for a year if he were spared. He regained his health and walked around court like a miniature Jesuit".

This was common, once. Catholics of my generation will recall reading "The Sanctuary Lamp" in *This Is Our Town*, the third grade Faith and Freedom reader. In that story, "the woodcutter and his wife made a promise to heaven that if their loved child got better, she should be clothed in white for the next seven years."

Many people in Europe made vows to dress their children in blue in honor of the Virgin Mary. In Mexico still, people perform *mandas* in fulfillment of promises made to God or to the Virgin Mary or to a saint. These may involve wearing a religious habit, as young de Brito did, or saying certain prayers.

In India, the Shrine of St. John de Britto [sic], is a site where many mothers and fathers make private vows.

[Dealing With Deities: The Ritual Vow in South Asia](#), [3] edited by Selva J. Raj and William P. Harman, published by the State University of New York Press in 2006, describes the vows made by various devotees, including Hindus and Muslims, at shrines, including Oriyur, the place where John de Brito was beheaded.

Search terms: "de Britto" and "de Britto women". Page xix is a map of India, showing the location of Oriyur. Page 3 explains why and how the ritual vows are made. Page 46 shows the Shrine of St. John de Britto and lists the caste groups who regard him as "their favorite clan or family deity". Page 50 shows a boy who "has his hair shaved as a sign of dedication to St. John de Britto".

"During the annual festival at the shrine of St. John de Britto, a steady stream of devotees flocks to church-sponsored tonsure houses for hair-shaving where dozens of barbers are pressed into service."

Women, too, praying to de Brito for children, have their heads shaved. See P. 52 for a description of a fertility ritual women undertake at his shrine. (And note the picture of the baby with his hair "tonsured to resemble St. Anthony's hair style".)

Click [here](#) [4] for images of St. John de Brito.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.sjweb.info/jesuits/saintShow.cfm?SaintID=64>

[2] http://www.manresa-sj.org/stamps/1_Brito.htm

[3] <http://www.amazon.com/Dealing-Deities-Ritual-South->

Asia/dp/0791467074/ref=sr_1_11?ie=UTF8&sr=books&qid=1265249049&sr=1-11#noop
[4] <http://www.santiebeati.it/immagini/?mode=album&album=39625&dispsize=Original>