
Book Reviews

Contemporary Voice of Dalit
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John Stratton Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke and Swapna Sharma (eds.), *Bhakti and Power: Debating India's Religion of the Heart*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2019, xi+255 pp. ISBN: 9789352876211.

This book on bhakti's relationship to power is based on papers presented at a conference in the US in May 2016 and the contributors are also mostly scholars based in North America. The book has an Introduction section and 17 chapters divided in three parts: 'Situations', 'Mediations' and 'Solidarities'. A long established view is the belief that 'bhakti empowers the downtrodden and ostracized, that it has the ability to provide a voice to those who have no voice—members of the non-elite groups,' (p. 6), but the editors, in the learned Introduction note that although there is some truth to this, the relationship between bhakti and power is far more complex, and further state that many people have been 'excluded from realms in which bhakti is celebrated' (p. 7). Regarding bhakti's relationship to power, the editors observe that gender and caste are the most important, and these two subjects are discussed in many of essays. On the issue of caste, the editors refer to the view of Ambedkar, that the bhakti movement had not done anything for the Dalits, and that 'bhakti's true power seemed too often to lie in its ability to dissuade people from taking political action because of the theological emollients it provided' (p. 9). This is a key issue. Ambedkar chose to convert to Buddhism, and gave it a political interpretation. Bhakti as subaltern protest is not a main issue dealt with in the chapters of this book nor are Dalit bhakti saints such as Ravidās, Chokhāmēlā and others. The editors remark that the chapters in the book give no definitive answers on the relationship between power and bhakti, and the question to what degree bhakti has served to countermand hatred, injustice and human need, remains unanswered.

Most of the chapters analyse poetry, hagiographies and paintings. The first essay of the first part 'Situations,' is Karen Pechilis on the female Tamil poet saint Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār. Her focus is on the association of Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃyār with the cremation ground. Gil Ben-Herut's interesting chapter criticizes the use of modern ideals in presenting early Vīraśaiva traditions. He analyses an early Kannada hagiography of this Śaiva bhakti community, Harihara's *Śivaśaraṇara Ragalegaḷu*, and argues that social non-discrimination was limited to the realm of worship practices, caste distinctions were not denied and early Vīraśaiva traditions also did not even have an egalitarian spirit. Ben-Herut notes that the *vacanas* were reformulated by later agents, and are not reliable sources of the original views. In Chapter 3, Heidi Pauwels analyses some poems of Harirām Vyās. She introduces the chapter with asking good questions such as 'how political correct is bhakti?', 'does bhakti work to liberate low caste people' or 'does it work to co-opt them by "inculcating obedience?"' (p. 49), and concludes that bhakti is a plural phenomenon, there are many bhaktis. She and several others in the book apply the term 'anachronistic' to some previous interpretations that have emphasized protest and egalitarianism, and she reviews accusations of bhakti voices having been hijacked for particular programs or bhakti being 'pressed into service to support contemporary agendas' (p. 49). In the poems selected by Pauwels, Harirām Vyās condemns food rules, hypocrisy, Brahmins who are more concerned with texts and ritual purity than bhakti, but she

shows that Harirām Vyās has a purely spiritual agenda also, a strong religious message of devotion to his own god (Kṛṣṇa), and not a progressive social agenda aiming at reforming society. Similarly, he favours patriarchal values, that a woman should regard her husband as her god, and that only good women qualify as bhaktas. Chapter 4, by Eben Graves, describes social mobilization of performers of devotional music in contemporary Bengal. Joel Lee's brilliant essay tells how Arya Samaj attempted a Hindu majoritarian inclusion of Dalits by attempting to impose the text *Śrī Bālmīki Prakāsh* on them and include them as bhaktas. The text attempted to connect the *Chāndāl Bāl Mīk* with Vālmīki, the author of *Rāmāyaṇa*, two of many Vālmīkis in Indian history. Lee states that 'To ask who feels *ghṛṇā* [revulsion] for whom is to trace the contours of a felt community' (p. 74) and argues that upper-caste Hindus needed the sanitation labour castes in order to construct a Hindu majority, but the subsequent social history of these castes shows that the project was only imagined and not actually felt.

The second part 'Mediations' starts with an enthusiastic chapter by Christian Novetzke. He calls attention to the concept of 'political theology' and the thesis that 'theological ideas become governmental and social principles' (p. 86), and argues, based on analysis of inscriptions, the *Līlācaritra* and the *Jñāneśvarī* that bhakti in Marathi-speaking regions in the thirteenth century aimed at political outcomes: creation of a political public of those who speak Marathi, live within the area of the Marathi speakers and were bhaktas. Novetzke notes that *Jñāneśvarī* offers salvific rewards to deal with social injustices, and that bhakti 'came to imply an ethics regarding the salvation not just of all souls but of the soul of moral society itself' (p. 93), but readers may not be convinced and they may question how it relates to the view of Ambedkar, that the bhakti movement had not done anything for the Dalits. Chapter 7, by John Cort, presents bhakti as an elite cultural practice and gives an important modification to the view of bhakti literature as literature of protest and the language of uneducated people. He notes that many early bhakti hymns were written in Sanskrit, so were the Purāṇas, and the theological treatises which theorized bhakti were mainly written by elite Brahmans. His essay details Dīgambar Jain bhakti in North India, and argues based on Dīgambar Jain evidence that bhakti is found in all strata of Indian society, it can be subaltern, but also elite, and that there is no bhakti in the singular, but many bhaktis. Chapter 8, by Manpreet Kaur, discusses a piece of Punjabi Sufi bhakti poetry about the love affair of a flute playing herder boy Ranjhā and a young woman Hīr, and their transformations and argues that the portability of the text makes it speak to devotees of multiple traditions and identities. Phyllis Granoff in her chapter analyses the illustrated manuscript (from 1836) of an Assamese translation of the first chapter of the *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa*. In the next chapter, David Haberman defines bhakti as relationship, and worshipful interaction, and looks at the worship of Mount Govardhan, understood as a visible present form of Kṛṣṇa, and often worshipped at home in the form of a single stone, sometimes with anthropomorphic embellishment. Lastly, in the second part, John Stratton Hawley takes a theoretical approach and identifies 15 opposites that bhakti can be interpreted as mediator of. Hawley wants to keep the idea of bhakti as belonging to a single field and thinks that this is one purpose of the rhetoric of bhakti, and seems also to want to argue that bhakti is a universal category.

The third part, 'Solidarities', has first an interesting chapter on Hindu–Muslim encounters in Bengali hagiographies of Caitanya, by Kiyokazu Okita, with a focus on violence and shifting Hindu–Muslim relations. Next, Chapter 13, by Shrivatsa Goswami, is a devotee's evaluation of the achievements of Caitanya, and he views bhakti as part of the self-correcting pattern of gradual change in Indian history. Divya Cherian's important chapter is on the elevation of Vaiṣṇava bhakti in the late eighteenth-century Marwar due to patronage of wealthy people in power in the region which coincided with Kṛṣṇa bhakti becoming 'increasingly inaccessible to the nonelite' and tilting 'more toward power than protest' (p. 188). Tyler Williams' essay, also on bhakti in Rajasthan, takes up the role of mercantilism in Dādū Panth and Nirañjani Sampradāy, and his chapter also illustrates bhakti as an elite phenomenon. He argues that

bhakti creates the market as a spiritual community that converts material wealth into spiritual wealth. He further maintains that the power of bhakti is not the ability to produce submission or liberation, but in restructuring these relationships. Chapter 16, by Aditi Kini and William Pinch, on bhakti in North Bihar, analyses memory and Mithila's topography and waterscapes in Bihārī Lāl Fitrat's text *Āīna-i-Tīrhut*. Finally, in the last chapter Richard Davis relates his experience with teaching bhakti to North American students which contain helpful instructions.

The essays of the book are full of interesting information and analysis. The essays inform on bhakti not as protest but as power. The concept of bhakti, like the concept of religion, covers a large variety of phenomena and many dimensions. Bhakti has the power to create and mobilize communities, and one of bhakti's functions seems to include new layers and groups of society in salvific projects, but bhakti may also privilege elites. Bhakti's role in territorialization of religion and hinduization of India, although dealt with in the chapter by Joel Lee and touched on in other chapters could perhaps have received more attention in the book. Bhakti is a varied phenomenon and those who argue for the plural term 'bhaktis' instead of the singular 'bhakti' get rich support from the essays in the book. The plural term, however, makes it also harder to generalize about the topic and the book contributes to problematize any simplified or sweeping statements made about the many bhaktis.

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