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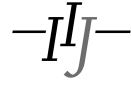
Book Reviews

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Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz, *Reciting the Goddess: Narratives of Place and the Making of Hinduism in Nepal*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xx, 321 pp. £110,00. ISBN 978-0-19-934116-0.

The work considered here has already deservedly received much praise and attention. Rather than repeating what has been observed by other reviewers elsewhere, or summarizing the work once more, here I would like to focus more specifically on what Birkenholtz's research contributes to the field of Purāṇic studies, and add some reflections on the use of the manuscripts involved.[1]

The book centers around the goddess Svasthānī (translated as "Goddess of One's Own Place", pp. 43–46), one of Nepal's most popular deities, but a deity who has, by and large, escaped scholarly attention: "Even the extensive research done by early scholars of Nepal such as Brian Hodgson and Sylvain Lévi, whose work often included inventories of important (though primarily Buddhist) manuscripts and traditions, makes no mention of Svasthānī" (p. 35). More specifically, it is concerned with a body of texts in which the observance of Svasthānī's *vrata* is promulgated, the *Svasthānīvratakathā* ("The Story of the Rital Vow to the Goddess Svasthānī", abbreviated SVK). Effectively what the book does, in the author's own words, is "to excavate these narratives that are reflected in the pages of the *Svasthānī Kathā* and contextualize them within a broader framework of the religious, cultural, and political movements and conversations on the Indian subcontinent that shaped medieval and modern

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1 I am aware of the following reviews and notices: Ajay Dave, *Journal of Dharma Studies* 1.2 (2019), 313–315; Christoph Emmrich, *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 39.1 (2019), 249–251; Rachel McDermott, *Journal of the American Academy of Religions* 88.4 (2020), 1196–1198; Westin Harris, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 80.3 (2021), 783–785; Anne Mocko, *History of Religions* 60.3 (2021), 248–250; Alisha Saikia, *Religious Studies Review* 48.2 (2022), 289–290. I acknowledge the support of the European Research Council, grant number 101054849 ('PURANA: Mythical Discourse and Religious Agency in the Puranic Ecumene'), in writing this review.

Nepal and informed the forging of its identity as a Hindu kingdom, particulary vis-à-vis Hindu identity in the region" (p. 2). The *Svasthānīvratakathā*, which in origin can be traced back to the sixteenth century, but which has been significantly expanded upon over the subsequent centuries, constitutes a "textual archive," with hundreds of manuscripts surviving in private and public collections in Nepal: "The NGMPP [Nepalese-German Manuscript Preservation Project] began to collect and microfilm *Svasthānī Kathā* texts in the early 1970s, but some decades later ended their documentation because the project had already amassed several hundred SVK manuscripts" (p. 33). The huge number of divergent manuscripts of this rich textual archive, combined with the fact that the Svasthānī observance is a living tradition to the present day, offers a unique opportunity for studying the making of a religious tradition in all its complexity.

To take stock of this "surplus of manuscripts" (p. 32), Birkenholtz made a selection of manuscripts on the basis of a set of criteria such as date of composition, state of the manuscript, language, and period of composition: "In total, I surveyed approximately 125 SVK manuscripts and did a close reading of two dozen texts, roughly five SVK texts per century (from the oldest extant manuscript of 1573 through the present)" (p. 34). Appendix A provides an overview of manuscripts referenced in the book. The vast majority of these manuscripts are written in Newar or Nepali, with the exception of two Sanskrit manuscripts (NGMPP B13/42, dated 1573 CE, and NGMPP B13/27, dated 1654 CE) and one written in a combination of Sanskrit and Newar (NGMPP E3110/37, dated 1603 CE). The only manuscript for which a transcription is actually provided is this bilingual one (in Appendix C), while for passages cited from other manuscripts typically only a translation or summary is given. This is perhaps understandable from a practical point of view, but it means that the reader has no access to the source texts themselves and would have to go back to the manuscripts to check their actual readings.

Manuscript NGMPP E3110/37, dated 1603 CE, is an interesting document and not for nothing singled out for special treatment (an image of the first folios is shown on p. 96, figure 3.2). Its main language is Newar, but it cites the Sanskrit verses in the *pūjāvidhi* opening and the *phalaśruti* close of the text. After each Sanskrit verse the manuscript provides a Newar-language prose translation, which typically elaborates upon the Sanskrit verse (pp. 97–98). The practice is somewhat reminiscent of certain Old Javanese texts that likewise consist of a combination of Sanskrit verses followed by, in that case, expanded Old Javanese prose renditions.[2] The Sanskrit verses cited in NGMPP E3110/37

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2   See, e.g., Thomas M. Hunter, 'Translation in a World of Diglossia', in: Ronit Ricci & Jan van der Putten (eds.), *Translation in Asia: Theories, Practices, Histories* (Manchester 2011), 9–26.

have a parallel in the oldest svk manuscript, viz. NGMPP B13/42, dated 1573 CE, which is composed entirely in Sanskrit. It is a pity that Birkenholtz has not included the text of this short manuscript, consisting of eight palm-leaf folios only, for it seems to form the starting point of the tradition, and should thus be of great relevance to the reconstruction of the svk's textual development (pp. 92–95). This becomes especially clear when one tries to make sense of the Sanskrit verses cited in the Newari manuscript NGMPP E3110/37, for, as Birkenholtz observes, "these Sanskrit verses are particularly corrupt and show significant influence from the local Newar vernacular language." (p. 229). She reproduces them, without interfering with the text, "including the grammatical mistakes made in the original manuscript" (p. 229). Indeed, in many cases, the Sanskrit is pretty incomprehensible, and one wonders how the author has been able to make sense of the text (an English translation is included in Appendix B). Comparison with the text included on the first folio of the Sanskrit manuscript NGMPP B13/42, of which an image is reproduced on p. 92, figure 3.1, shows that much of the Sanskrit text can in fact be easily reconstructed on the basis of this manuscript's readings, which overall appear to be quite good. Although I had to strain my eyes and use a magnifying glass to be able to read the image reproduced there, it shows, for example, the reading *samāsena pravakṣyāmi vahvarthaṃ vratam uttamam* instead of the hypermetrical *samāsena pravakṣyāmi vahvamṛthaṃ vratam uttamaṃ* (p. 230, l. 19) of NGMPP E3110/37, rendered on p. 216 as "I will succinctly narrate the ultimate *vrata*, of which the rewards are many." I am not sure how *vahvamṛthaṃ* can mean "of which the rewards are many", but the reading *vahvarthaṃ* (i.e. *bahvarthaṃ* "rich in meaning") in NGMPP B13/42 makes perfect sense and is surely to be preferred. Likewise, *trinetraṃ dhyānarūpiṇam* clearly underlies the cited reading *trinetra dhyānalupinaṃ* in the first verse of the text (actually the image reproduced on p. 296, figure 3.2, reads *dhyānalūpiṇaṃ*). Finally, it is noteworthy that in the opening invocation, NGMPP B13/42 reads *śrīsvasthānaparameśvarāyai* instead of NGMPP E3110/37's *śrīsvasthānipralameśoyai* (*sic*!). Moreover, in verse 7 NGMPP B13/42 reads *svasthānaparameśānyā* (instead of NGMPP E3110/37's *svasthānī parameśīnyā*), while, according to the transcription given on p. 93, the colophon of NGMPP B13/42 starts: *iti śrīriṅgapurāṇe svasthānaparameśvaryyā vratakathāsamāpta[m]*. In other words, in all three cases cited the name of the goddess is not Svasthānī but forms part of a longer compound Svasthānaparameśvarī/-parameśānī. I wonder if Svasthānī was not originally supposed to mean "Goddess of/in Her Own Place" rather than "Goddess of One's Own Place" as rendered in the book. In any case, these changes are clearly significant and deserve a place in the study of the text's development and the goddess at the heart of it.

As can be observed from the colophon cited above, the svκ is attributed in its earliest surviving manuscript to the *Liṅgapurāṇa* (*ra* and *la* are commonly confused). This attribution was followed in the Newar tradition, but changed in the Nepali texts: "Scribes of the older, primarily Newar-language manuscripts often attribute the svκ to the *Linga Purāna*,[3] while later Nepali-language svκs are more often linked to the *Skanda Purāna* [...] The later *Svasthānīpūjāvidhi* or Svasthānī ritual texts often cite the *Padma Purāna* as their source" (p. 93). The situation reflects the fluid nature of Purāṇa attributions that can be observed elsewhere as well.[4]

The subject of the Purāṇicization of the svκ constitutes a major thread running throughout the book: "Between the sixteenth century and the present, the *Svasthānī Kathā* expanded from a handwritten eight-folio palm-leaf local legend on the origin of the *Svasthānī vrat* into a full-fledged Purāna of thirty-one chapters in over four hundred printed pages" (p. 18). Birkenholtz links this process of Purāṇicization in particular to the shifting sociopolitical dynamics inaugurated by Prithvi Narayan Shah's eighteenth-century conquest of the three Newar kingdoms of the Nepal Valley, and the subsequent growing dominance of Parbatiyā hill Hindus over the Newar population among whom the text initially circulated. Purāṇicization is defined as "the process by which a text gradually assumes the form, function, content, and/or ideology espoused in one or more of the Sanskrit Purānas." (p. 103). Through this process the local story was brought into conversation with the translocal figures, narratives and theologies of the Purāṇas. In the eighteenth-nineteenth century, this process took place in three phases: 1) the incorporation of the narative cycle of Dakṣa Prajāpati involving Satī's self-immolation and subsequent rebirth as Śiva's wife Pārvatī; 2) the incorporation of the Madhu-Kaiṭabha creation narrative which shows a great resemblance to the *Skandapurāṇa*'s *Kedārakhaṇḍa*; 3) the incorporation of a set of popular Purāṇa narratives such as Śiva in the pine forest, the burning of Kāma, and the story of Vṛndā, the wife of the Asura Jālaṃdhara (p. 104). The process is not clear-cut, however, and differs across the language divide of Newar and Nepali: "there is a clear and consistent structure to and homogeneity among Nepali-language svκs that is generally absent from Newar-language svκ texts, which exhibit a pronounced lack of structural conformity" (p. 109).

The svκ not only responds to the pan-Indian Purāṇa tradition but should also be read in relation to the local Purāṇa corpus of Nepal. Birkenholtz, follow-

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3   The book consistently omits all underdots in the transcription of Sanskrit words.

4   For an extreme example, see Peter C. Bisschop, *The Vārāṇasīmāhātmya of the Bhairavaprā-durbhāva. A Twelfth-Century Glorification of Vārāṇasī* (Pondicherry 2021), 5–7.

ing Horst Brinkhaus, identifies four texts as constituting Nepal's local Purāṇa corpus: the *Svayambhūpurāṇa*, the *Paśupatipurāṇa*, the *Nepālamāhātmya*, and the *Himavatkhaṇḍa*, dating from the fourteenth or fifteenth century to the seventeenth century. As she observes, the last three texts display an increasing complexity and recursivity: "there was a growing need to contextualize these local works within a larger framework that was already established" (p. 136). A similar development can be traced in the Purāṇicization of the SVK as well: "[The scribes] strategically chose to identify the SVK as part of the Mahāpurāna tradition, evinced by scribes' claims of direct lineage from the great Sanskrit Purāna tradition asserted in the final colophon" (p. 137). To this small Purāṇa corpus of Nepal should be added the *Vāgmatīmāhātmyapraśaṃsā*,[5] which has incorporated the *Paśupatipurāṇa* as part of it, displaying as such a similar tendency towards increased complexity and recursivity.

A noteworthy feature of the process of Purāṇicization identified by Birkenholtz concerns the increasing repetition of similar events in episodes relating to different narrative characters, which "reinforce the structure of the text through the use of explanatory frameworks and repetitive elements that foreshadow later events and recollect earlier ones, narrative tricks frequently employed in Hindu literary traditions" (p. 139). As she observes, "[t]hese methods of textual development are not unique to the *Svasthānī Kathā*, but were commonly employed in Purāna texts as well as other important oral and written traditions, such as the *Mahābhārata*, to make texts more comprehensible and memorizable" (p. 139). However, because she has access to such a rich archive of closely interrelated texts from different centuries, Birkenholtz is able to trace the very evolution of this repetitive structure in the SVK's textual development in a manner that is, as a rule, not possible for earlier Purāṇas, where the manuscript tradition tends to present the latest version of the text at the expense of a lost earlier stage.[6] It is in particular in this regard that the book makes a major contribution to Purāṇic studies, for it shows, more than does any other case I am aware of, how Purāṇas as 'living texts' were capable of developing and changing over time, weaving "a complex web of recollection and foreshadowing that reinforce[s] the narrative framework while advancing the storyline" (pp. 140–141). In the case of the SVK, this involves an increasing tendency towards Brahmanization, as well as the eventual marginalization of the

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5   Rob Adriaensen (ed. by Peter Bisschop), '*Tīrthayātrākhaṇḍa*: *Vāgmatīmāhātmyapraśaṃsā* 1–4. Materials for the Study of Sacred Nepāla, I', *Journal of the Nepal Research Centre* 13 (2009), 147–177.

6   Cf. Giorgio Bonazzoli, 'Composition, Transmission and Recitation of the Purāṇa-s (A Few Remarks)', *Purāṇa* 25.2 (1983), 254–280.

original core "Gomayaju-Navarāj-Chandrāvatī narrative" of the *kathā*, which in the end got swallowed up by the all-encompassing Purāṇic cosmological framework in which it was placed.

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