

Engaging South Asian Religions: Boundaries, Appropriations, and Resistances (Hindu Studies). Edited by MATHEW N. SCHMALZ and PETER GOTTSCHALK. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011. ix + 243 pp. ISBN 978-1-4384-3323-3 (hbk.)

This volume of the *SUNY Series in Hindu Studies* is set within the wide range of studies questioning the epistemological approaches and scholarly practices of Indology or Orientalism on a larger scale. The hypothesis, and expectation, behind the book is that “focus on the paradigms [in Pierre Bourdieu’s meaning] in practice in Western approaches to South Asian religions will hopefully prompt more critical engagement with contemporary paradigms as well as conventional categories and terms, not least of which is, of course, *religion*” (3). Mathew Schmalz and Peter Gottschalk, its editors, have divided the book into three parts (each containing three papers) named after what they see as three recurrent themes present in this modern history of engagement and paradigms: “Boundaries,” “Appropriations,” and “Resistances.”

Following the editors’ introduction — which, to my mind, lacks substantial comment on the highly problematic concept of “religion,” which is yet at the core of the book — the first part is dedicated to the theme of “Boundaries.” Opening this part, Gottschalk’s essay deals with the much debated question of the socio-religious categorizations practiced by the British and the “allegations that the British changed Indian society through the very practices by which they sought to know them” (22). “However,” suggests the author, “this contention would be undermined if pre-British states placed a similar emphasis on these categories in their social measurements” (*ibid.*). By comparing specific examples of pre-British (Munhata Nainsi’s survey of a Marwari district in 1658–1664) and British enumerations of Indians (Alexander Boileau’s survey of the same district in 1835), the author demonstrates how the model of the European natural sciences influences the British practice of classification used for the census. While his description of the European development of the scientific taxonomy is without a doubt instructive for the understanding of Boileau’s (and later) classifications, we are nevertheless left wanting more in regard to Nainsi’s (and other pre-British) practices of categorization.

By far the densest chapter of the book, Arvind Mandair’s essay offers a re-examination of G. W. F. Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* in order to disclose the paradigms determining the place given to “*India and Indology within the emerging discourse of Wissenschaft*” (43). While developing a deep analysis of the role of historicism in the European mindset toward Indology, Mandair’s essay fails, however, to go a step further and give to “Indic phenomena” a real place in his text despite the question he rightly raises in the beginning: “What prevents Indic phenomena from being used as resources for

conceptual thinking rather than being regarded as relics?" (40). As a consequence, one does not see how it is possible to go beyond the epistemological boundaries outlined by the author.

Drawing us to quite the opposite end in the spectrum of the power relationships, i.e., from Eurocentric Hegelianism to a marginalized cult in the Sundarbans, Sufia Uddin's paper plays with both geographical borders (the Sundarbans cover both India and Bangladesh) and religious boundaries (the cult of the Bonbini being shared by Hindus and Muslims alike). If Uddin's paper provides a very interesting chapter to the book (in particular through its narration of the Bonbini myth and the opening comments of the author on the notion of "syncretism"), its theoretical and heuristic potentialities could certainly have been better exploited. For instance, one does not clearly see what exactly is "the nature of difference between [Hindu and Muslim] cosmogonies," something which the author promises to address (62).

"Appropriation," which forms the second part of the book, is considered by the editors as "a sign of both strength and weakness," which, "as a descriptive category and as an act, thus depends upon shifting understanding of authority and power" (11–12). Mathew N. Schmalz opens this part with a vivid description of a gathering of North Indian Catholic charismatics and Khrist Panthis in Varanasi. Testimonies of participants offer the opportunity for the author to shed light on the various interplays between religious boundaries and personal appropriations and the threat that undesirable appropriations and uncontrolled boundaries can be to the Catholic authorities.

The second chapter of this part is a fine analysis by William R. Pinch of the process and conditions of the canonization of the sixteenth-century Jesuit priest Francis Xavier between 1552 and 1623. This paper succeeds in contextualizing the testimonies and discourses on Xavier, whether they belong to the period of canonization or to the twentieth century — in the latter case, mainly the work of Jesuit scholar Georg Schurhammer. Here, the theme of appropriation is linked to the way European Jesuits examined the question of Xavier's miracles and potential canonization in the light of their own reading and apprehension (in both meanings of the term) of India's context.

Whereas the two previous authors place the topic of appropriation inside the subject of their research, Liz Wilson, in the next chapter, connects it to her own approach, which she explains with great clarity. Her aim is to offer "suggestions for placing feminist analysis of South Asian Buddhist texts on a firm epistemological foundation that recognizes limitations in hermeneutical authority but is not immobilized by those limitations" (138). Although she mentions that a pure feminist approach and analysis of Gotami's (i.e., Buddha's foster mother and maternal aunt) suicide story would remain incomplete

without contextualizing her action, she leaves several questions unsolved (for instance, the question of the difference in meaning between Gotami's suicide and Subhadra's).

The third part, entitled "Resistances," very interestingly deals with the scholars' own testimonies of past research and their experiences of resistance from among their readerships. In what I found as one of the most convincing essays of the book, James W. Laine reflects on what has been called the "Laine Affair" and cleverly analyses the political and psychological reasons that have made his book *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* (2003) the focus of hate-filled accusations. In a simply but correctly formulated sentence, Laine reminds us of our role as scholars in the modern academy, which is "to push back frontiers of knowledge in large part by resisting narratives that have become hegemonic and thus block critical thought" (170). But, continues the author, this should not prevent us from also assuming "a critical resistance to more subtle narratives that mindlessly glorify the sanctity of free speech and enlist the scholar in a self-congratulatory enterprise that blocks self-critical thought and emplots [*sic*] his or her work in yet another hegemonic narrative" (*ibid.*). In a rather similar vein, Paul B. Courtright recalls the rather tragic episode following the new Indian edition (2001) of his *Ganesa: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings* (1985). Much like Laine, he exposes the approach at the basis of his book and the reasons why his reading of the Ganesh story, partly interpreted along Freudian lines, has given rise to such fiery reactions. Both authors attempt to explain resistances to their books from members of the Hindu community as a reaction to a perceived endangerment of masculinity and patriarchal values.

In between, the paper by Shahzad Bashir, besides being very readable, is a very fine analysis of his personal experience with Nurbakshis (a small Islamic sect in Baltistan, Pakistan, and Ladakh) during a visit he made in 1998. Besides showing the importance of the minority factor in the self-perception and representation of a small community, its author skilfully describes the interpretative complications that have emerged while "doing historical research [as a medievalist] on religious contexts that remain relevant to practitioners" (187). In the light of this experience, Bashir questions the loci of power and reminds us through a remark that could well provide the conclusion to the book that we, scholars, "have power over the voices we represent when we write about them, but we lose control over our work when it leaves academic discussions and is taken up in the contexts from which we derived our data" (175–176).

The book extends to an afterword by Saurabh Dube, who presents without complaisance a critical review of the papers, to which some contributors give a subsequent response. Although its *raison d'être* in this book is not clear, most

of his comments are relevant and offer the reader a welcome external view on the chapters.

Taken as a whole, the book presents several editorial failings and imperfections. For instance, footnotes 5 to 7 in Mandair's paper are missing, while years of publication of bibliographical references do not systematically correspond to those indicated in the texts, besides other minor inconsistencies. Should a new edition be published, it would be advisable to carefully read the whole book once more and make the necessary corrections. In conclusion, this is a book I would no doubt recommend to students, especially Part Three, because of its challenging questions. I would, however, have greatly appreciated more attention to South Asian paradigms in order to offer potentially new ways of thinking outside of the conventional "western" categories and boundaries.

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