

History and Society as Depicted in Indian Literature and Art. Part I. Drśya. Visual and Performing Arts. Ed. by Lidia Sudyka. In: *Cracow Indological Studies*, Vol. XIV. Institute of Oriental Studies, Jagiellonian University, Cracow 2012, xi + 279 pp.; ISSN 1732–0917 – Reviewed by Nadia Cattoni, University of Lausanne

The present volume is the first of two volumes dedicated to the study of *History and Society as Depicted in Indian Art and Literature*, focusing on “Visual and performing arts”. The idea is to reconstruct the history of India “not only by historical documents *sensu stricto* but also by literature and art” (p. v), a tendency followed by numerous scholars in the field of South Asian studies nowadays. In this way, the book proposes a collection of eleven articles (some of them having been collected from the International Seminar organised in 2011 by the Department of Indian Studies of Jagiellonian University) examining amongst other subjects, art, Indian poetics, theatre, dance or popular Hindi films.

The eleven papers are preceded by a small introduction by the editor presenting briefly the content of the articles, and are followed by a review of Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s book *Writing the Mughal World. Studies on Culture and Politics* by Piotr Borek.

Even if the diversity of the subjects and material chosen by the authors is quite important, the editor has tried to arrange the articles by subject. The first group gathers together three articles about the Indian harem, Kuṣāṇa art and Indian sacred geography in which the notions of place and space are prominent:

The first paper by David Smith deals with the subject of the Hindu harem in ancient and medieval India giving a commentary on the anonymous verse *snātā tiṣṭhati kuntaleśvarasutā*, engaging the theme of the multiplicity of women versus the singleness of the king, discussing the place of the harem as the centre of the court, and addressing the erroneous western notions of harem.

The second, very well constructed and contextualised paper, written by Elena Restelli, focuses on the depictions of Durgā (the warrior goddess who defeats the demon-buffalo Mahiṣa) in the region of Mathurā trying “to understand the context in which these first images originated and to understand where the Mathurā artists drew inspiration from in producing

these pieces” (p. 21). Giving the context of the Kuṣāṇa Empire and the specificities of Kuṣāṇa art – embedded in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural climate – she shows how the most popular female deity worshipped by the Kuṣāṇa, Nana, and the Mathurā goddess share the same iconography (for example the appearance of the lion or the crescent moon). These resemblances reveal the capacity of the Kuṣāṇa rulers not only to maintain their specificity but also to integrate locally.

The third paper by Vera Lazzaretti deals with Indian sacred geography through the evolution of the image of Kāśī in 18th-20th century “picture maps”. The author shows the ideal image of the city and its representation on religious maps, highlighting the overlap between the mythical representation of the city and its historically and socially determined reality. She first starts with some theoretical remarks about space and place in order to understand properly the case of Banāras. Then she continues with the construction of the mythic image of the sacred city through various texts, before analysing “a few examples of maps in order to highlight the intrusion of contemporary discourses of delimitation of places in the representation of ideal space and to trace the evolution of the city visual image” (p. 47).

The second group is made up of four papers focused on the theatre, with a presentation of the famous *Nāṭyaśāstra*, discussion around the status of the actor and analyses of different plays:

Natalia Lidova in “The *Nāṭyaśāstra*: the Origin of the Ancient Indian Poetics” gives an analysis of chapters XV to XIX of the famous Treaty on theatre. With the intention of studying it as the earliest available source for the study of ancient Indian poetics, and following meticulously the Sanskrit text, she addresses subjects such as metric, performance, ornaments, languages, etc.

Also dealing with the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the next article co-authored by Elisa Ganser and Daniele Cuneo focuses on the actor’s social status and agency. From the first chapter, the authors introduce the notion of ambiguity which encompasses the status of an actor, giving the example of the comparison with a god (p. 88) or with a courtesan (p. 90), an ambiguity that is found in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which on the one hand eulogises the status of

the performer, and on the other, as in the *Dharmaśāstras*, discredits them. With a special focus on chapters 36 and 37 enlightened by Abhinavagupta's commentary, they discuss, for example, the term *naṭa*, "actor", "performer" and the connotations attached to it. The second part of the article is dedicated to the analysis of the curse-and atonement episode related in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, according to four hermeneutical levels: mythological, *śāstric*, aesthetic and social.

The third paper of the "theatre-group" is written by Klara Gönc Moačnin and examines the *Caturbhāṇī*, a collection of *bhāṇas*, "which can be understood as farces, satires or causeries" (p. 134), by various authors and a *prahasana*, another kind of farce, written by Mahendravikramavarman I, in search of descriptions of old Indian society and urban life.

Finally Danielle Feller's "Nuns involving in the affairs of the world" deals with the *Mālatīmādhava*, one of Bhavabhūti's plays, intending "to determine the exact function of these religious characters in the play, and evaluate whether or not their behaviour and actions correspond – to a certain degree at least – to the social reality of Bhavabhūti's time, or whether they simply reflect the then-current clichés on such personages". For that purpose, the author puts in parallel the nun's roles in the play, as acting as go-betweens or encouraging suicide, and the expected attitude of a nun on such occasions according to the literature of Buddhist *dharma*. She interestingly concludes by expressing the idea that literature gives a more nuanced image of the Buddhist nun than the texts about Buddhist discipline, which probably show a more idealised one.

The two following articles can be gathered under the theme "performance":

"The eightfold gymnastics of mind: preliminary report on the idea and tradition of *aṣṭāvadhāna*" by Lidia Sudyka and Cezary Galewicz presents the tradition of *aṣṭāvadhāna*, a kind of literary game, well-known in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka in the perspective of cultural studies and at the crossroads of literary studies and social anthropology. After an introduction on literary games in Ancient India, the authors, on the basis of epigraphic and literary evidence, reconstruct the social history of *aṣṭāvadhāna*, the procedure and rules around the game, and give portraits of the most famous Avadhānis up to the present today.

The second one, Maria Angelillo's "Caste in the making, dance in the making" examines the example of the Kalbelia caste and the social status of female professional dancers in modern Indian society. With her case study "providing a paradigmatic example of invention of tradition" and a well-conducted analysis, she encourages us to think about the notions of art, not only as "a historical, economic, political and cultural product" but also as "an agent for historical, economic, political and cultural transformations", the notion of caste not "being the unchanging, historically frozen structure", and the notion of globalization not producing "a global culture concept" but rather serving "localized cultural purposes".

The two papers of this group are good examples of thinking about social history in a dynamic way, seeing events, facts and history in movement instead of remaining in static thoughts.

The last group is composed of two articles about Bollywood films and Bengali literature:

"The Indian struggle for independence in popular Hindi films of last decade" by Tatiana Szurlej deals with popular historical films produced in Bollywood after 2000. With many examples she shows how filmmakers manipulate the audience erasing uncomfortable historical facts.

And the last article by Gautam Chakrabarti focuses on the image of the Bengali detective in literature and film, presenting the famous example of Byomkesh Bakshi, a creation of the Bengali novelist, poet and screen-play-writer Saradindu Bandopadhyay (1899–1970). He shows how this literary figure is representative of *bhadralok*, "a term (literally, "civilised people") used, till quite recently, to denote the Bengali middle classes, which cultivated a specific aura of eclectic cultural and intellectual tastes, despite their social conservatism".

In conclusion, going through all these articles, the reader gets a good idea of how and where it is possible to find some historical facts or descriptions in literature and art, and how to reconstruct history through this particular kind of material. Nevertheless, the reader may regret the fact that no attempt is made in the introduction or conclusion to unify the different endeavours shown in the various case studies, to give some points of

methodology, or, for that matter, to question the idea of reality, especially when we are talking about literary fiction and opposing both concepts of reality and fiction.