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Editorial

This fourth issue of *RoSA* exhibits the range of disciplines and methodologies that enrich the study of South Asian religions. Four of the six articles are wholly or partly within the broad area of epic and puranic studies, but are very different in approach; a fifth (McDermott) has puranic narrative as a background. Two (McDermott, Okita) are largely on nineteenth-century Bengal, as the place where European norms had most influence on Hindu interpretation of tradition. Despite the diversity of approach and of material, there are some common concerns in the theoretical and empirical challenges which the six contributors encounter and explore as they determine or dispute the diversity and commonalities within particular religio-cultural traditions, texts and communities. Several of them (Gielen, Owen, Richman) reject interpretative models which impose a normative or unifying narrative on to conflicting or contradictory ideas or voices. Among these, Paula Richman has played a central role in enabling us to comprehend the diversity of the Ramayana tradition. Elsewhere, together with other scholars, she has documented how the story of Ram has varied according to historical period, regional literary conventions, religious affiliation, genre, intended audience, and political context, as well as the social location and gender of teller, performer and audience (Richman 1991, 2001). Here, she reveals how varied the story is even within one area of South Africa; in another article, McDermott traces the varied fortunes of the narratives of Durgā in Kolkata. Mark Owen, adopting an emphatically reflexive and anti-essentializing approach, argues that text-based approaches have imposed their own model of Buddhism, subordinating the 'multivocality of Buddhists' and distorting or ignoring material which can only be discovered by fieldwork.

Richman's, McDermott's and Owen's articles show how fieldwork and the examination of records of cultural performance can change our view of a tradition that has long been studied through texts. However, it is clear from the other articles that there is no longer, if there ever was, a single textual approach. Taking the Poona *Mahābhārata*—whose status as a text has been disputed—as a given, Simon Brodbeck traces structural similarities between stories within the epic and outside it. The underlying structure, he claims, has been concealed because it reflects moral norms which were rejected in the age in which the text received its present form. Kiyokazu Okita's study is also largely concerned with the interpretation of a text, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,* in a period when its moral norms were widely rejected; he shows how Bhaktivinoda, for whom it was an authoritative source, was obliged to defend it

by showing that it had been misinterpreted. Joris Gielen criticizes the use of contemporary moral concerns, such as gender relations, as a tool for reading a text; he argues that we need to appreciate the kind of text it is and how it is meant to benefit its reader or hearer.

Paula Richman's book *Many Rāmāyaṇas* (1991) took as its goal the theorization of the diversity of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition in South Asia. It was received with universal scholarly interest and acclaim. Richman's determination to look outside the text and study other forms of expression, and her insightful insistence that the *Rāmāyaṇa* may encompass texts, enactments, or interpretations that contradict or oppose each other, are particularly relevant in the context of her present article. Here, her research focuses on Hindu communities whose origins lie in the indentured labour system of colonial Natal. She documents the diverse ways in which four groups of Hindus in Greater Durban celebrate the birth of Ram, and analyses the celebrations in multiple ways: at the level of individual religious experience, in historical context and as part of the Hindu diaspora. She finds that the groups provide a contrast in linguistic communities, type of ritual and location, and even in their understandings of the figure of Ram himself. The Arya Samaj group regard Ram as an exemplary human being, while the Telugu Vaishnavas conceive him to be God on earth. People of Hindi- and Telugu-speaking descent celebrate Ram Navami enthusiastically while most Tamils show little interest. Some, influenced by the social reform movement spearheaded by E. V. Ramasami, interpret Ram's story as an account of how Ram conquered and subjugated the indigenous inhabitants of South India. The final event which Paula Richman attends, 'Wedding of Rama and Sita', a dance drama performed in a public theatre, brings together different Indian dance traditions and 'enacts union at the personal, familial, royal, celestial and theological level'. Its performers and publicists not only make use of a classical tradition but seek very consciously to appeal to non-Hindu South Africans.

Rachel McDermott's article is also concerned with the celebration and performance of a traditional narrative, and with the re-presentation and consequent reinterpretation of inherited cultural material in the face of a more or less uncomprehending or disapproving culture. To the Europeans who accepted the invitations of wealthy Hindus to Durga Puja in early nineteenth-century Kolkata, Durga herself was only 'a quaint side-show', or, worse, 'a painted clod', while their Hindu hosts seem quite ready to keep her in the background, allowing a distinctively Hindu occasion to be assimilated, in Orientalist (in the Saidian sense) eyes, to 'the splendid fiction of the Arabian Nights'. Various responses to European disapproval can be seen in the rejection of everything to do with the Pujas by Rammohun Roy, the Brahmos, the Theophilanthropists and others, and, later, in Bankim's rationalistic and selective treatment, and in apologetic accounts which seek to rescue the festival from European and secular influences. The politicization of Sakta imagery in the late nineteenth century encouraged references to Durga's violence as

well as to her femininity. Nevertheless, McDermott finds that Durga Puja has rarely been a focus of communal strife; she emphasizes its peaceful and joyful character, ensured partly by the communist state government of Bengal.

Simon Brodbeck's article is highly speculative and controversial, and will arouse considerable debate among scholars of the *Mahābhārata*. He brings together a considerable body of material, which he construes as pointing to a way in which the reconstituted Poona *Mahābhārata* might be newly artistically comprehensible, and understood as 'a designed unitary object'. He traces a recurring drama that takes place down the generations of a lineage, a drama in which the actors are principally male 'operators', each defined by his position in a lineage: a man, his son, his father-in-law, and two sets of ancestors. Brodbeck focuses our attention on the framing story and the framed story within the *Mahābhārata.* The framing story is recounted by Ugraśravas, and tells of Kings Parīkṣit and Janamejaya of Hāstinapura, and of Janamejaya's snake sacrifice. The framed story is also related by Ugraśravas, but it is the narration of what Vaiśampāyana told Janamejaya at the snake sacrifice: the story of Janamejaya's ancestors. Brodbeck's analysis throws light upon each succeeding king's responsibility to continue the patriline and to make a son who will become a replica of himself and his forefathers. In the case where the king marries a woman whose son becomes the heir of her father, the father plays the husband's role. 'If a wife is a woman one produces lineal sons with, the *putrikā* is her father's wife.' Brodbeck turns to the *Bhaddasāla Jātaka* and the legends of Niwal Dai for further support in tracing this continuity of motif and theme. He challenges existing scholarship by concluding that the *Mahābhārata* describes the production of a new family history suitable for a changing age.

Joris Gielen takes up, and challenges, the argument of C. M. Brown—expounded in several publications—that the *Brahma-vaivarta-purāṇa* develops a 'feminine theology' focused upon Radha. He argues that the Purana cannot be categorized as a feminine text because of its lack of consistency—it displays both positive and contemptuous attitudes to women. Moreover, Radha's hierarchical role is changeable. She is not consistently portrayed as superior to or equal to Krishna. Indeed, Krishna is sometimes depicted as supreme without mention of Radha. Gielen follows Clooney in distinguishing between texts that logically elaborate theological topics and other religious texts that do not have logical consistency in their discussion of these topics. A critical reading of the Purana convinces him that the term feminine theology is not appropriate. There are two problems. Firstly, while Radha is active in creation and salvation, she is unable to 'redeem' herself, to control the fruition of *karma*. Secondly, the ambiguity regarding her hierarchical position remains. 'Claims that are asserted with full vigour in one chapter are denied in the next chapter.' Thus to find a feminine theology in a text like the *Brahma-vaivarta-purana* may be to give it a spurious and artificial coherence. The lack of logical consistency, and the impossibility of meaningfully reconciling the differences, make

it difficult to use the term 'theology'. Gielen examines and challenges Doniger O'Flaherty's assertion that absence of logical consistency is 'the Hindu way of resolution', and Brown's statement that the male and female theologies are complementary. He argues that at the base of both these scholars' claims lies the assumption of ultimate theological unity. Gielen resists this assumption: 'The possibility of overarching theories or theologies is contradicted by the variety that lies in the text, and there is no point in attempting to retrieve a theology on the basis of logical coherence'. In his final section he argues that since the stories as found in the Puranas are not theology, he sees no reason why a description of a goddess would necessitate equal treatment of women. There seems to be no need to reconcile celestial story and social reality. Interestingly, Gielen states that the possibility of a contradiction between a secondary position of women in Indian society and the sometimes exalted position of the goddess is a theological problem. However, he observes that this problem only surfaces if there is a search for an ultimate truth out of which logical and absolute rules for human behaviour can be deduced.

Kiyokazu Okita's article is less contentious. It deals with the life and work of Bhaktivinoda Thakura and his 'unique' synthesis of particular reformist and traditionalist lines of discourse that emerged in nineteenth-century Bengal. It is interesting to contrast Gielen's reflection upon the non-theological nature of a typical Purana and the 'immorality' of Krishna, with Bhaktivinoda's defence of Puranic tradition and his belief that the *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam* or *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is the highest of all religious texts, forming the basis of a rich and complex theology. Bhaktivinoda is, as the 'disciplic succession' published by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness proclaims (Bhaktivedanta Swami 1972: 29), the great-grand-guru of Srila Prabhupada, ISKCON's founder *acharya*, and it is this relationship that makes the article of particular interest. While the author does not deliberately set out to show the links between Bhaktivinoda and Prabhupada, the article is a further step in the historical contextualization of one of the most important missionary movements of the twentieth century.

While many nineteenth-century Bengali thinkers combined reform with tradition, the claim that Bhaktivinoda's way of doing this was unique has some force. Okita tells us that Bhaktivinoda was the son of a rich Kāyastha family who in his earlier life associated with prominent Bhadraloka thinkers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshub Chandra Sen, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Sisir Kumar Ghosh who sought to reform the religio-social aspects of traditional popular Hinduism. Okita argues that they rejected the immediate past (the Puranic tradition) in the name of the authority of the remote past (the Vedas, the Upanisads). The interest of the article, however, lies in its exploration of the complexity of Bhaktivinoda's thought and writings in which he defended tradition but took into account modern rational empirical critiques. He defended the purity of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* but rejected popular practices that were ethically unacceptable to the bhad-

ralokas and Western critics. He defended the *varnasrama* system but attacked the contemporary development of caste. He viewed women as a deterrent to spiritual progress but opposed child marriage and polygamy. Okita describes Bhaktivinoda as taking a 'spiritually oriented traditionalist stance' regarding the status of women and caste, thus perhaps unintentionally identifying spirituality with tradition rather than rationality or social activism.

Mark Owen's fascinating article on Buddhist preservation of whole bodies has the immediacy and freshness which springs from recent fieldwork. Owen is absorbed in problems of methodology because he is convinced that it is only by taking an ethnographically reflexive and mindful approach to research that any kind of authenticity in the field can be achieved. Although respectful to Buddhist scholars past and present, he sees the discipline of Buddhist studies as essentially flawed by its textual bias and essentialism. Although he recognizes that for some decades now the importance of going beyond the text has been acknowledged, he argues that the reality is often otherwise. The voices of practitioners have been too often subdued in the interests of a unifying narrative. Owen critiques this as a form of cultural imperialism. Thus his own study of Tibetan Buddhist bodily preservation, drawn mainly from fieldwork in North India, is a testing ground for methodological theory and insight. Like many anthropologists today, he brings to his research a post-modern and reflexive perspective which seeks to privilege the voices of participants, and reveal the untidiness and contradictoriness of his own experience of fieldwork.

In introducing an issue of *RoSA* which includes work both on the Puranas and on nineteenth-century Bengal, we must record our sorrow at the death of our colleague Freda Matchett, who contributed to both (Matchett 1981, 1993, 1996, 2001, 2003). She was a devoted scholar of great modesty, and a delightful contributor to the Spalding Symposia on Indian Religions out of which *RoSA* sprang.

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