

Review

Soulless Matter, Seats of Energy. Metals, Gems and Minerals in South Asian Tradition, edited by Fabrizio M. Ferrari and Thomas W. P. Dähnhardt. Sheffield: Equinox, 2016. xxxii + 282 pp., £22.95/\$29.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-78179-129-5.

Reviewed by: Frederick M. Smith, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242 USA.
frederick-smith@uiowa.edu

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The editors, Fabrizio Ferrari and Thomas Dähnhardt, have collaborated on several books on realia in South Asian religion and material culture, and Ferrari has himself edited a few more. It is a field that is receiving increased attention, and Ferrari is to be congratulated for his efforts. The volume under review fills an important and interesting lacuna in the study of South Asian traditions, especially religious tradition: the use of what are more often than not considered inanimate objects and inorganic material in the service of human actions and goals. Thus, we find stone images that are ritually awakened; the use of special naturally potentiated objects that are used in various forms of worship; mercury that is enlivened for various medicinal, therapeutic, and magical purposes; gemstones that mediate between the world of the living and the planets; substances that are transformed into cosmetics used to enhance human beauty; and much more. Much of this has remained unexplored, although the volume suggests just how important the material world is to religious and cultural concerns.

In the introduction, the editors attempt to establish a tone for the volume by examining cosmologies and theories regarding sentience and the validity of the material world in Indian philosophical texts. Essentially, what they search for is the notion of a continuum of sentience, reducing, indeed eliminating, the dualisms that are behind most human action, or, one might point out ironically, behind the actions of most sentient beings. These begin with the Vedas and the supposition that the world is suffused with energy, which is a legitimate interpretation of Agni in the sense of fire. They move to Sanskrit grammar, in which all grammatical subjects are explicitly agents (whether stated in the active or passive). From there, the editors move into the more recognizable philosophical domains of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya,

Vedānta, and Jain and Buddhist philosophies, all with cosmologies that support a continuum of sentience. We find the same in devotional and ritualistic culture, in ideologies of Indian science and health, and in concepts of the body and embodiment.

The volume is divided into four parts: myth and ritual, science and health, power and devotion, and body and embodiment. The first section contains three articles. The first is by Mikael Aktor, who discusses the *pañcāyatanapūjā*, in which five deities are worshipped as natural stones. The deities and stones are: Śiva, a *bāṇalinga*, a long striated stone from the Narmada river in Madhya Pradesh; for Viṣṇu, a *śālagrāma* or fossil ammonite from the Gandaki river in Nepal; for Sūrya, a *sphaṭika* or crystal, from near Thanjavur; for Gaṇeśa, a red *śoṇabhadra* from the Son river in Bihar; and for Devī, a gold streaked *suvarṇamukhi* from near Srikalahasti in Andhra Pradesh. Aktor inquires into why these stones are used, especially in an initiation ceremony he documented in Chennai in 2014. The second is by Francesco Brighenti, who examines the goddess Hīṅgulā, in a remote desert in Baluchistan(!). The name is derived from the Sanskrit word for vermilion or cinnabar (mercury sulfide). Brighenti describes the deep history and, interestingly, the geology and geochemistry of the area surrounding this cave temple, one of the few remnants of Hinduism in Pakistan. The deity, regarded as self-manifested (*svayambhū*)—a theme that crops up throughout this volume—is now also worshipped as the tomb (*dargāh*) of a female Sufi saint named Bībī Nānī. Monia Marchetto and Manuel Martin Hofer examine iron and sapphire in myths and rituals pertaining to Saturn (*śani*). Śani, widely regarded as ominous, and to be feared and worshipped, has received considerable scholarly attention in recent decades. The authors summarize Śani vows and worship, and describe the role of the gem that is to be worn (blue sapphire) and the ring (iron, often a horseshoe nail, on the middle finger of the right hand) for appeasement of Śani, with an instructive and convenient table of the features, including gems, for all the nine planets (*navagraha*, p. 54).

The second section, on science and health also has three essays. The first, by Anthony Cerulli and Caterina Guenzi, is on the use of gemstones as remedies in Indian astrology and medicine. In this richly detailed chapter, they note, for example, that prominent ayurvedic texts prescribe the wearing of gemstones to protect a person from snakebite, or that gemstone powder mixed with milk and honey are used in certain treatments. They draw on well-known texts such as the *Rasaratnasamuccaya* and the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* for their astrological data. In remedial astrology, the gemstone must be compatible with the moon sign of the client, and the purity of the stone is important. The authors do not discuss the strong relationship of astrologers and gem dealers in India. The second paper, by Dagmar Wujastyk, discusses mercury tonics (*rasāyana*) in Sanskrit medical literature. The production of medically usable mercury is recorded in texts of the early second millennium, and Wujastyk summarizes the lengthy and exacting techniques of refinement, of

breaking down the toxicity so that it can act as a healing agent. The alchemical literature often but not always coincides with the ayurvedic texts. The benefits are highly praised, and Wujastyk provides a few very good snippets of the recipes, noting that this extensive literature is only now being subjected to scholarly analysis. The third paper, by Barbara Gerke, also discusses the curative powers of heavy metals, but in the Tibetan tradition. The Tibetan word is *ngülchu*, ‘water silver’, which is sometimes a mercurial compound, but may be other compounds as well. Gerke discusses the geological and textual sources of *ngülchu*, its special place in Tibetan pharmacopoeia, and an array of classificatory challenges associated with it.

The third section, on power and devotion, has two chapters. The first, by Antoinette DeNapoli, is on the use of stones and metals as therapeutic in North Indian ascetic practice. DeNapoli, an ethnographer, gathered data on stone therapy medicine from 49 *sādhus*, spoke with hundreds more, and focused, in this article on a certain Guru Ma, in Rajasthan. The stones addressed here are quartz, pearl, and silver. Wearing these is closely associated with dharma, good health, and general well-being, and are regarded as especially potent on days deemed powerful such as the full moon night in October, *śarad pūrṇimā*. The second paper is by Eleanor Nesbitt, who discusses metal as material and metaphor in Sikh tradition. Sikhs wear iron on their right wrist, and carry it on their bodies in the form of a small sword (*kirpān*, *khaṇḍa*, *tegh*). Nesbitt examines the deployment of iron, then its transformation into steel, in Sikh sectarian life in India and in the diaspora. It is a symbol of strength, blessing, and transformation.

The fourth section, on body and embodiment, has three essays. The first, by Deeksha Sivakumar, surveys the historical use of women’s cosmetics in India, beginning in the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, examining dance and theatrical performance, and stops briefly to examine their uses in Iran and Egypt. She examines the notions of adornment, the cultural construction of the morality of the use of cosmetics, why it is both glorified and criticized, and how it affects material and personal relationships. The second essay is by Mattia Salvini, who discusses the ‘world of precious things’ in Buddhism. He especially examines the word *ratna*, ‘gem’, in its broad semantic horizons, including the equation of the dharma as the preeminent *ratna*, diamonds and *bodhicitta* as thunderbolts (*vajra*), the Buddha as the wish-fulfilling stone (*cintāmaṇi*), but does not neglect the Buddhist use of gemstones themselves. The final article, by Ana Balželj, is on earth-embodied beings in Jain tradition. Balželj reviews Jain cosmology and classifications of material aggregates, the divisions of *karman*, the construction of the physical body (*audārika-śārīra*) and the karmic body (*kārmaṇa-śārīra*), the unfolding of different kinds of beings, the senses, the length of life (from 48 minutes to 22,000 years), the resolution of embodiment in non-violence, and much more.

This rich volume, which tightly hews to the assigned topic of materiality in text or ethnography, will likely introduce readers to many dazzling young

scholars, mostly European. One topic was oddly omitted: water, about which much can be said. Most of the inorganic and inanimate materials addressed here are social actors, capable of being manipulated for moral good (or bad). This is obvious in every article, but there is a peculiar absence of anything theoretical that can account for this evident agency. The editors and many of the authors could, for example, have profitably employed Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, or McKim Marriott's theory of coded substances. This demonstrates not only inattention to theory that might actually help us understand the role of the phenomena well described in this volume, but the isolation of most (?) textualists and ethnographers of South Asia from closely associated fields. Nevertheless, every article was exciting in this highly recommended volume.