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Review

Bhakti and Power: Debating India's Religion of the Heart, edited by John Stratton Hawley, Christian Lee Novetzke and Swapna Sharma. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2019. xii + 255 pp. ISBN 9780295745503 (pb).

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If we are all equal in the sight of God, that doesn't stop us being unequal in terms of power, status or prestige, or from invoking the idea of equality before God to reinforce such inequalities. The seventeen studies in this book arose from a conference in 2016, in which participants were asked 'Is bhakti a language of power or protest?' (p. 10); as the editors show in their introduction, the question leads to more questions about the social and political role of bhakti. The introduction discusses bhakti in relation to caste and gender, pointing out that gender is implicated in the endogamy and patriarchy that are involved in caste practice, but has not been adequately discussed in connection with bhakti (p. 7). Several of the papers try to remedy this deficiency.

The editors have co-ordinated the studies by placing them under three headings, 'Situations', 'Mediations', and 'Solidarities', and by interpreting them in their introduction. As most of the authors are based in the USA, this is an American book by nature, and four of the studies are on Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, which has acquired a status of its own in the USA thanks to ISKCON. The book is also partly concerned with how the West (that is, the increasing part of the world which takes its cues from the USA) understands bhakti. This important concern is most apparent in Richard H. Davis's account of his experience teaching bhakti poetry in translation in American universities; a similar concern appears in David L. Haberman's rejection of the understanding of bhakti as 'a Christian-like spiritualized faith that has little to do with action' (p. 134)—an understanding which he finds exemplified especially by Rudolf Otto—and in warnings by several authors against reading modern ideas into bhakti poetry.

One feature of Vaiṣṇava devotion is 'the essential femaleness of the soul in its relation to a male deity' that Davis mentions (p. 219), and the femaleness of the mythologized figure of bhakti herself (p. 222), which follows from the grammatical gender of the word. But this relation of female soul to male

deity implies an identification of maleness with dominance. The introduction points out the female figures in the history of bhakti—a minority, but a noticeable one—as do several of the papers. But it then asks whether these heroines were real women, or at least whether some of the poems attributed to them were the work of men (pp. 8–9). Remembering how their biographies or hagiographies were written by men, and also how men take female roles in many ritual dramas, this is a pertinent question.

Some papers explore the nature of bhakti itself. Shrivatsa Goswami expounds the bhakti doctrine of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition as 'a carefully and multiply integrated intellectual system' (p. 177) going back to Caitanya. J. S. Hawley sees bhakti as mediating between human and divine, *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa*, Hindu and Muslim, Dalit and brahmin, and many other binaries—though he does not mention male and female. David L. Haberman sees bhakti as a relationship with an embodied divine form. Just as Arjuna in *Bhagavadgītā* 11.46 needs Kṛṣṇa to take his familiar form instead of his terrible *viśvarūpa,* so the *bhakta/ā* needs an anthropomorphic form to give *sevā* to, even if it is only a stone from Govardhana on which s/he has painted a pair of eyes. Tyler Williams, looking at the Dadu Panth and the Nirañjani Sampradāy in Rajasthan, finds bhakti to be a way of retaining ties of kin and business while avoiding karmic bondage by devoting all to God and his people, thus providing a distinctive way of thinking about individual, family and polity.

Among those who criticize modern understandings of bhakti, Gil Ben-Herut starts with the well-known view of the twelfth-century Kannada *vacana*s as poems of protest, and warns against any anachronistic tendency to read modern ideas of gender equality and caste equality into them. He examines the earliest biography of the poets, the *Śivaśaraṇara Ragaḷegaḷu*, where he finds that 'social non-discrimination' is limited to 'the realm of worship practices', and the independence of women is 'usually limited to the religious arena' (p. 40). Heidi Pauwels similarly warns against an anachronistic reading of bhakti as 'politically correct', and also against seeing *nirguṇa* bhakti as egalitarian and *saguṇa* as elitist (p. 49). Examining the sixteenth-century Vrindaban Vaiṣṇava Harirām Vyās, she finds that while his poems reject purity rules, brahmin authority—even that of Goswamis like himself—and the textual authority of the Veda or the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, his egalitarianism is 'a spiritual matter', and he has no 'progressive social agenda' (p. 56).

Other papers concentrate on individual figures or groups. Karen Pechilis presents the Tamil woman poet Kāraikkāl Ammaiyār through her poetry, in which she 'crafted a devotional subjectivity' for herself (p. 25) and 'reshapes the mythology of Śiva' (p. 29). Pechilis relates Kāraikkāl's self-identification as a *pēy*—a ghoul who feeds on corpses—to the developing Śaiva tantric tradition. She differentiates this view of Kāraikkāl from the one presented by her biographer Cēkkiḻār, who 'imagine[d] a conflict between her bhakti and ordinary gendered social expectations' (p. 35). John E. Cort studies the seventeenth-century Digambara Jain poet Banārsīdās and others, and argues

for a plurality of bhaktis rather than the one thing called bhakti in the title of the book. He shows bhakti as a theme of elite literature without denying that it can also be a form of subaltern protest. Manpreet Kaur shows how the love story of the married lady Hīr and the flute-playing cowherd Rānjhā, in Sūfī and Sikh poetry in Panjabi, crosses religious boundaries. She sketches an interpenetration of the figures of Rānjhā and Kṛṣṇa, Hīr and Mīrābāī, and Nāth yogī and Sūfī which exemplifies 'what we might call a commensal attitude among many religious modes' (p. 105).

Some of the papers show the relation of bhakti to power in history. Phyllis Granoff looks at a lavishly illustrated nineteenth-century manuscript, an Assamese version of the first chapter of the *Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa*, which includes verses in praise of the Ahom king Purandhara Sinha. This paper is peripheral to the study of bhakti, but throws light on the way poet and painter express devotion to Kṛṣṇa and to their king—devotion that includes the abstract pictures with which the painter illustrates an indescribable infinite. In another peripheral paper, Aditi Natasha Kini and William R. Pinch describe the Urdu *Āīnā-i-Tirhut*, by the late-nineteenth-century lawyer Bihārī Lāl, also known by his pen-name Fitrat. This text, which preserves much oral tradition, is an account of the history and geography of northern Bihar. What makes this study relevant to bhakti is Fitrat's interest in the fourteenth-to-fifteenth-century poet Vidyāpati, with his royal patron Shiv Singh. The account is suggestive, and calls for further research. Divya Cherian uses Rajasthan state archives to examine the position of Vallabha's *puṣṭimārga* in the eighteenth-century Rathor kingdom, and finds that here bhakti 'tilted more toward power than protest' (p. 188), favouring brahmins and merchants over polluted castes. Christian Lee Novetzke examines the ways in which devotion to Viṭṭhal (the form of Viṣṇu who stands in the temple of Pandharpur, Maharashtra) is related to political power, Maratha identity and the Marathi language, and finds that 'The political theology at the heart of Marathi bhakti remains vibrant today' (p. 93). In another study of the past that is relevant to the present, Kiyokazu Okita contrasts two versions of the story of Caitanya's encounter with a *qāzī*, placing the two hagiographies in their political contexts, and giving the lie to crude narratives of Hindu India under an alien Muslim yoke—a point that is highly relevant in India today. Joel Lee traces the identification of Vālmīki as a sweeper to an Ārya Samāj tract of the 1920s, part of a campaign to recruit Dalits into a constructed Hinduism dominated by the upper castes. In a study focused entirely on the present, Eben Graves traces the politics of devotional music in West Bengal. The All India Kīrtan and Bhakti Gīti Artists' Association campaigns for the welfare of musicians and for institutions to foster their art, playing on the idea of Bengal as a musical nation, and echoing the similarly ambitious name of the All India Trinamool Congress, the dominant party of West Bengal.

Not all the authors are equally concerned to question the egalitarian, status-rejecting view of bhakti. However, they each present original research in their own field, and they deal with a range of distinctive languages, regional cultures and histories, and literary and social conventions. The book should inform and stimulate future studies of bhakti, and its warnings against reading modern concerns into pre-modern sources should be heeded.