

Review

Mobilizing Krishna's World: The Writings of Prince Sāvant Singh of Kishangarh, by Heidi R. M. Pauwels. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2017. xvi + 262 pp., \$30 (pb). ISBN 9780295742236.

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When Sāvant Singh visited Vrindavan sometime in the 1750s, he did not receive the reception he had expected. ‘My official name was announced,’ he later recollected, ‘but it left them aloof and cold.’ But when they heard that this prince of Kishangarh was none other than Nāgarīdās, the author of popular devotional poems and songs, ‘they ran up to me, tears in their eyes. Some came running to meet me with open arms [...]. Some were moved and spontaneously burst out in song with my signature line. [...] All of them thronged around me. They insisted that I recite and sing [my] songs’ (pp. 89–90).

It is this dual identity of Sāvant Singh or Nāgarīdās as devotee and politician that Heidi Pauwels explores in this book, and while the poet-prince himself at times suggested in his own writings that the worlds of courtly intrigue and devotional immersion were at odds with each other, Pauwels argues that the two cannot be easily extricated from one another. The above account of Sāvant Singh’s reception in Vrindavan is recorded in *Tīrthānand* (‘The Bliss of Pilgrimage’), an account of his pilgrimage through the region of Braj composed in 1753, but, as Pauwels demonstrates, during his extensive sojourn in Braj he acted both as the devotee Nāgarīdās and as the prince Sāvant Singh, because the immediate occasion for his travels was his banishment from his own kingdom. When his father Rāj Singh, the ruler of Kishangarh, passed away in 1748, Sāvant Singh was away in Delhi. Within a week he was anointed king, but before he could return home, his younger brother Bahādur Singh usurped the throne and forced him into exile. Unable to find immediate political support to overthrow his brother, Sāvant Singh, now a king without a kingdom, retreated to Braj, where he continued trying to form alliances with both Rajputs and Marathas, but also became pulled further into the world of devotion to Kṛṣṇa. He was torn between his duty

as king and father to reclaim the throne, if not for him then for his son, and his devotional desire to just ‘live in Braj and see life’s purpose achieved’. ‘If only I had two bodies!’, he wrote early in his exile: one body could ‘stay with the goddess, and live in many countries abroad, suffer all kinds of sorrow in a world bereft of devotion’, while the other could ‘revel in good company and enjoy true bliss to the full’ (p. 188).

Mobilizing Krishna’s World’s ‘main intent’ is to ‘historicize’ the devotional world that Sāvānt Singh inhabited, a world ‘which is sometimes treated as other-worldly and unchanging’ (p. 197). The book thus examines ‘how myth is mobilized’: ‘how devotion shapes understandings of life events, how mythological patterns impose themselves on human agency, and how myth intersects with life narratives and discourses of legitimization’ (p. 7). It aims to ‘uncover both the politics in apparently atemporal religion and the neglected religious in political history’ (p. 8).

Chapter 1 (‘Soldiers Marching’) and Chapter 2 (‘Gods and Saints Relocated’) offer a detailed outline of, respectively, the political and religious context of Sāvānt Singh, with a particular emphasis on the final two decades of his life. As mentioned, Pauwels argues that these two areas should not be seen in isolation from each other, but that there is a constant ‘come-and-go between temple and battlefield’ (p. 37) and that ‘pilgrim’s paths intersected with those of soldiers’ (p. 198). As Pauwels reminds us, the ascetics of the Nimbārka monastery at Salemabad and those of the Rāmānandī community at Galta, with both of whom Sāvānt Singh had a close connection, were not just *rasika* devotees but also mercenaries who fought for the interests of various rulers. The conflict between the two brothers, she suggests, also extended into the religious sphere, with Sāvānt Singh seemingly supporting Nimbārkan interests, but Bahādūr Singh promoting the tradition of Vallabha (p. 48).

The remaining three chapters offer a close study of some of Sāvānt Singh’s writings. Readers looking for a detailed study of the extensive writings of Sāvānt Singh (which the book’s subtitle suggests may be on offer here) will be disappointed. The book analyses just three works of Sāvānt Singh’s oeuvre, and even an overview of his many other works—Gauḍ’s edition of his complete works lists 70 titles—is not offered. These three works, however, all date from the period of his exile: *Rām-carit-mālā* (‘Garland of Rāma’s Romance’) was composed in 1749, the year after he was overthrown, *Tīrthānand* (‘The Pilgrim’s Bliss’) was composed in 1753, and *Pad-prasaṅg-mālā* (‘Garland of Stories and Song’) is undated, but ‘likely was composed toward the end of Nāgarīdās’s life’ (p. 107). These three works, then, offer an intimate glimpse into the inner life of Sāvānt Singh at a time when his tumultuous political life naturally occupied much of his attention.

Five years into his exile, Sāvānt Singh wrote an account of his recent sojourn in Braj, *Tīrthānand*, the focus of Chapter 3 (‘Devotees on the Move’). Although it may be tempting to regard Sāvānt Singh’s pilgrimage as an escape from the political world, Pauwels suggests it ‘may be more fruitful

to look on it [...] as a quest for psychological relief and healing' (p. 79). But even then, she demonstrates, during Sāvānt Singh's devotional pilgrimage in Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa's land, the conflict that led him there is ever present. While on pilgrimage he is also looking for allies, and even when he settles in Braj he does so in Barsana, 'something of a cosmopolitan hub' (p. 86) at the time with a very strong Jat presence.

Chapter 4 ('Legends Mobilized') turns to *Pad-prasaṅg-mālā*, a remarkable collection of hagiographical anecdotes about the power of popular devotional songs. This chapter is the longest in the book and also different in focus from the others, because neither the work nor Pauwels' reading focuses on Sāvānt Singh himself, who moreover was likely not the sole author of this text (see pp. 113–16). This shift makes this chapter somewhat disjointed from the rest of the book, even though Pauwels' insightful analysis of this text will be of special interest to scholars of vernacular devotion. *Pad-prasaṅg-mālā* recounts stories behind the popular songs of saints from a range of devotional traditions, and Pauwels discusses why Sāvānt Singh might have included those saints but also examines what this tells us about the circulation of both songs and hagiography in the eighteenth century and what we can derive from that 'about community identity formation and demarcation in the period' (p. 150). She argues that this text, when read in the light of Jai Singh II's recent push for reforms in devotional traditions, can be seen as a corrective to that, a 'contra-reformation' (p. 161)—or does it perhaps merely show the limits of Jai Singh's reforms?—because Sāvānt Singh favours stories of devotion that disregard issues of caste and purity and that privilege vernacular *bhakti* over both Sanskritic ritual and theological debate.

Finally, *Rām-carit-mālā*, the subject of Chapter 5 ('Myth Retold'), is a short anthology of just 31 poems in which Sāvānt Singh revisits the *Rāmāyaṇa* narrative. It is 'one of the few works by Nāgarīdās that centers on Rāma', and it is thus a bit of 'an anomaly' among his works (pp. 162–63). Pauwels suggests we should try to 'see the politics at work behind a mythological retelling' (p. 163). The work was composed during the first year of his exile, and throughout this chapter Pauwels highlights the parallels between the story of Rāma—also an exiled crown-prince whose brother rules the kingdom—and Sāvānt Singh's dire circumstances. She suggests that the compilation of this work was therapeutic for Sāvānt Singh, who was able to reflect on his own crisis through the narrative of his Lord, Rāma, and ultimately come to peace with it.

What makes *Mobilizing Krishna's World* such a delight is not just the striking and often very moving poetry that it studies, nor just the complex and fascinating trajectory of Sāvānt Singh's life, but also that this rich material is presented by someone who is exceptionally well-versed in the literature and scholarship of early-modern Kṛṣṇa devotion as well as being deeply attuned to its sensibilities. In highlighting how politics affected the development of devotion, and especially how political agents' self-perception was deeply

rooted in devotional practices, *Mobilizing Krishna's World* is an important addition, if not also correction, to the literature on early-modern religion in South Asia and its political history.