
Reading India

Lawrence A. Babb & Susan S. Wadley, eds.
Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia. U of Pennsylvania P US\$16.95

Saskia Kersenboom
Word, Sound, Image: The Life of the Tamil Text. Berg US\$19.95

Reviewed by Vijay Mishra

We continue to be fascinated by Western readings of India. Once the debates were about Indomania versus Indophobia, then it became a question of colonial dispatches and what they said about British rule, and finally, after further refinements of historical themes (Eric Stokes's work is exemplary here) the interest moved to questions of representation. Postcolonial theory has, in turn, brought to our readings of India alternative ways of exploring adversarial as well as complicit moments in the creation of Empire. The books I have before me are recent attempts to tell the story of India (or to speak about Indian encounters) that combine scholarship with a high level of self-consciousness about cultural sensibilities and the position from which one speaks about the "other." I begin with the Babb and Wadley volume which is, I would want to suggest, a rather unusual collection of essays on Indian cultural matters by a group of specialists who on other occasions may well have been seen as "Indologists." From what I can gather all the contributors to this volume can read at least one Indian language, and many are established scholars of Indian

culture. What is remarkable about this volume is the manner in which Indian Studies specialists engage with the burgeoning scholarly field of cultural studies. In recent years cultural studies has been read as a field in which one brings a largely non-linguistic competence to readings of the popular. When it comes to non-western cultures this means that the cultural studies academic would be interested in such matters as the commodification of culture through video cassettes, television, cinema and so on. Babb and Wadley's volume touches on something rather different. It examines the huge impact the media have had on religious matters in India. In many ways the narrowing of the field to religion is both the book's strength and its weakness, a strength because religion gives the book a unity often lacking in other edited texts, a weakness because it unwittingly continues the orientalist tradition of reading religion as the core of Indian culture. And this is a pity since the act of living in India is also a question of survival in a harsh land, and while Indians may be more religiously inclined than other people, there are many other aspects of their cultural existence that require attention.

In spite of this qualification, the volume has some fine essays on subjects such as calendar art and "god posters," the use of comics for national integration, the mechanical reproduction of religious music and sermons, Hindi cinema, and television serials. A number of observations may be quickly summarized here. We are told by H. Daniel Smith that god posters and calendar art

have had an enormous impact on "patterns of Hindu devotionalism" by bringing images of gods and goddesses into innumerable homes. Stephen R. Inglis examines the career of one of the great masters of calendar art, C. Kondiah Raju (1898-1976) and makes some exciting theoretical interventions into Benjamin's argument about the decline of the auratic status of the original in the age of mechanical reproduction. This essay is followed by two complementary essays by Frances W. Pritchett and John Stratton Hawley on Anant Pai's *Amar Chitra Katha*, a series of very influential comics modelled on the American Classics Illustrated comics. In both these essays what emerges is the way in which Anant Pai's own commitment to Indian secularism skews some very complex ideological moments in the texts themselves. Hawley's comparative readings of the representation of key saints in the comics against the historical facts make this ideological selectiveness very clear. The age of mechanical reproduction has also affected audio recordings and this aspect is explored in Regula Burchardt Qureshi's fascinating essay on the Sufi inspired *qawwali*. The genre is one of the most popular forms of religious music in India and Pakistan and one which has been exposed to the West in recent times through the extraordinary singing of the late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Scott Marcus examines the ways in which Hindu devotional music is being marketed through cheap and readily available cassettes. In the third section of the volume Steve Derne, Philip Lutgendorf and John T. Little analyse the relationship between religion and the visual media through cinema, television and video cassettes. In all three studies the power of the visual in transforming canonical religious texts or in transmitting religious messages to a national and global audience is seen as one of the decisive elements in the way in which contemporary Indian culture is represented.

There are, however, two general criticisms

that may be made about this book. The first is that the book, written by specialists, requires considerable effort on the part of someone interested in cross-cultural studies: indeed a fair degree of familiarity with high Indian culture is the unstated prerequisite throughout. The second is the absence of any real critique of the current state of Indian culture. To claim that the serialized *Ramayana* on television is another addition to the *Ramayana* tradition is one thing; to marginalize the considerable unease of large parts of the Indian population about the politics and aesthetics of this serialization is quite another. One gets the uneasy feeling that somehow severe criticism and comparative judgements are no longer fashionable.

The Babb and Wadley volume deals primarily with North Indian material. Saskia Kersenboom's book is about South India, specifically Tamil India. She works from what one gathers is a Tamil mode of producing knowledge/meaning. Here she has in mind a way of reading the world as a complex semiotic system made up of, as the title of her book suggests, word, sound and image. The reference to the title of one of Roland Barthes' best-known books in the English-speaking world is obvious.

However, where Barthes' *Image, Music, Text* examined the three as relatively independent semiotic systems, Kersenboom speaks of the three as constituting, in South Indian culture, a specifically Tamilian way of constructing meaning, or reading the world. In other words, the Tamil language itself constructs meaning by constantly relating "word, sound and mimetic image." Not surprisingly, in Tamil discourse is given priority over system. Modifying this argument a bit one could say that *parole* comes before *langue*, the surface structure before the deep structure so that worlds are constructed through specific articulations (of language and body) rather than through a pre-existent linguistic system. Recent work in the field of meaning-construction has

brought to our notice the importance of the body itself, and the extent to which any theory of textuality must engage with the world as other than just linguistic objects—both at the level of the world itself and at the level of how worlds are constructed. Where once there was the claim that worlds come into being only through language (and this idea remains strong in the tradition from Saussure, through Lévi-Strauss to Lacan), now the claim is that worlds are constructed through multiple modes of cognition in which all five sense organs as well as all the motoric organs in the body (to use a Samkhyan system here) are important.

Saskia Kersenboom's "proof" text is a short narrative that is the basis of a dance. In examining the relationship between the text and the dance as performed in the Bharata Natyam style, Kersenboom becomes conscious of the massive disjunction between a textual (that is a verbal) construction of the event through Western textual analysis and the Tamil construction of the same event that treats it as a complete social experience in which all the senses have participated. To be able to read this text as performed one has not only to describe it (in which case one also has to know the tradition of temple dancers in the culture as well as the dance/dancer's own prior history) but to view the event in the context of its performance. As she claims earlier on "no philological, historical, religious, moral, hermeneutic, psychological, functional, structuralist, semiotic, receptionist, sociological or (neo)-Marxist analysis and interpretation can represent what that textual event is." With this in mind the book comes with an interactive CD in which five minutes of the performance is included.

In South India the researcher is often asked "enta prayogam?" or "what's the use?" The value or utility of Kersenboom's research, as she explains at some length, is that her book is not simply a treatment of the object in a dispassionate way.

Kersenboom herself is an accomplished performer of the Bharata Natyam and is therefore a participant precisely in the "text" that is the object of her analysis. Much of what she writes would be acceptable to a whole group of current writers on language and representation. The book perhaps makes too strong a case for Tamil difference at the level of its own way of defining language and in many places the theoretical underpinning is both needlessly heavy and sometimes far too repetitive. But in as far as it draws our attention to worlds and systems that require both intellectual and bodily investment, the book demonstrates that to know something well, you do have to live through that experience. Kersenboom shows a rare Western understanding of both the Tamil language and one of its finest cultural forms, the Bharata Natyam. Finally, she draws our attention to the unity of the dancer and the dance, an issue that still remains central to modernist aesthetics generally.

Both books discussed here draw us once again to what may be called readings of the "East" in the wake of Edward Said's influential *Orientalism*. While debates will continue to rage about the polemical nature of Said's work, it must be said that in drawing our attention to the link between power and knowledge, the text forced scholars to engage with archives with a certain respect for the cultures that produced that material. These books—and many more published recently—bear testimony to a new mode of research and engagement with the "other."