

Vasudha Dalmia. *Hindu Pasts: Women, Religion, Histories*. Albany: State University of New York Press (SUNY), 2017. 390 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-6805-1.

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Orr on Dalmia, *Hindu Pasts*

This volume is a collection of fourteen essays that appeared in journals or edited volumes between 1990 and 2010, prefaced by an introduction entitled “Where these Essays are Coming From.” The autobiographical introduction does indeed help us understand the range and depth of Vasudha Dalmia’s scholarship represented in this volume, as she traces an intellectual voyage moving between Delhi, Tuebingen, Banaras, and Berkeley—among other places. Throughout this journey, and continuing into the present (with her most recent book, *Fiction as History: The Novel and the City in Modern North India*, published in the United States in 2019), Dalmia has been engaged with literature, especially Hindi literature. Many of the essays in this volume are centered on the close readings of particular texts. But her aim has consistently been “to work out the links between literature, performance, religion, politics, and modernity” (p. 10). And, further, her work shows how contemporary constructions of and connections between religion and politics in India may be linked to complex histories from the seventeenth century onward. Dalmia frames many of her essays with questions about these linkages: “Can Hindutva be read backwards?” (p. 170). Might the eighteenth century be seen as a transitional period that was “not connected or leading up to” com-

munalism (p. 101)? Does Hindi still play a role “in the kind of exclusivist identity formation which would leave out, or at best subsume, Indian Muslims” (p. 337)? What is different and what has remained the same? The title *Hindu Pasts* for this volume can be understood within this context, even as some of the essays challenge the meaningfulness in the past of the word “Hindu” (as well as “Hindi”) or seem not to deal with Hinduism at all.

The volume is divided into three sections, each with four or five essays: “Colonial Knowledge-Formation,” “Vaishnava Renewals c. 1600-1900,” and “The Hindi Novel: Nineteenth-Century Beginnings.” The titles of these sections hardly do justice to the content of the essays collected within each; for example, two of the essays in the first section concern “knowledge” being produced by Indian intellectuals and the third section deals with many more literary genres than the novel. In my review of the essays, I prefer to group them following the lead of the book’s subtitle—*Women, Religion, Histories*—considering under the rubric of “Histories” Dalmia’s histories of Indology and her histories of Hindi.

Three essays are directly concerned with women, or women’s issues. The first, chronologically, is “Women, Duty, and Sanctified Space in a Vaish-

nava Hagiography of the Seventeenth Century,” focusing on the *vartas* (hagiographies) of the Vallabha tradition, composed in Brajbhasha. Dalmia argues that these stories of devotees make “theological space” for women as part of the developing community, where service to fellow Vaishnavas or to the guru or to God might supersede one’s duty as a wife. “Sati as a Religious Rite: Parliamentary Papers on Widow Immolation [1821-30],” details how colonial authorities developed a discourse around sati featuring the sati herself as a victim of Brahmans and priests, of superstition, or of emotion; Dalmia suggests that responses to late twentieth-century incidents of sati betray the perdurance of colonial attitudes and legal frameworks. In “Generic Questions: Bharatendu Harishchandra and Women’s Issues,” Dalmia considers several late nineteenth-century publications of the figure who is the subject of her *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions* (1997). On the one hand, we have the Hindi women’s journal *Balabodhini* (Young Woman’s Instructor, 1874-77), edited and in large part written by Harishchandra, where puritanical and restrictive models for modern womanhood were promoted. Dalmia contrasts these texts with Harishchandra’s dramatic composition *Chandravali* (1876) centering on a heroine (named Chandravali) who is the lover of the god Krishna, and with the novel *Kulin Kanya* (A Girl of Good Family), published under his name in 1882, which was both a love story and a script for social reform. The themes of these latter two works—celebrating female subjectivity and the possibility of women’s agency overcoming patriarchal authority—were to be overwhelmed in the literature of the early twentieth century by the ethos of the increasingly entrenched “new patriarchies.” In all three of Dalmia’s essays dealing with women, the texts she examines are produced by men, and women’s experiences or voices are for the most part absent (as she readily acknowledges), reflecting the discursive milieu in which “women’s issues” were situated. But there is a twist, because *Kulin Kanya* was actually written (or transcreated from

a Bengali text) by Mallika, a young woman (perhaps a child widow) who lived under Harishchandra’s protection and collaborated with him on many literary projects. Dalmia’s discussion of what little we know about this woman, bringing her presence to the fore, is very welcome.

The theme of religion (colonial and Indological confrontations with religion, religious narrative and ritual, communalism, religious nationalism) threads through many of the essays in this volume; I will consider three. “Mosques, Temples, and Fields of Disputation in a Late-Eighteenth-Century Chronicle” examines an account of the Banaras royal house written by Fakir Khair-ud-din Khan at the behest of the British. Dalmia’s aim is to show how this text, its English translation entitled *The Bulwuntnamah* (The History of Balwant) serves as “a relatively dispassionate account of a time when the religion-based frontiers that were to harden in the colonial period had not yet formed,” even as it narrates various altercations and debates that took place between Hindus and Muslims—although not as homogeneous “communities.” In “The Sixth *Gaddi* [seat] of the Vallabha *Sampradaya* [religious community],” Dalmia’s text is the Brajbhasha *Mukundrayji ki varta* (The Story of God Mukundrayji), a nineteenth-century tract that records the doings of Girdharji Maharaj, responsible for the rise in fame of the Gopal temple in Banaras. In her reading of the text, she uncovers the interplay between different forms of religious authority (the appeal to the Vedic canon or knowledge of the intricate rituals of service to the image of Krishna) and Girdharji’s negotiations with newly emergent political forces—merchants, priests, and local rulers. In “The Modernity of Tradition: Harishchandra of Banaras and the Defence of Hindu Dharma,” we move more completely into the colonial context, where the worship of “idols” comes under attack not only by missionaries, but by Hindu reformers. Harishchandra’s writings in the 1870s offer a capacious (and modern) view of Hinduism as iconic, devotional, and monotheistic, accepting the Puranas as authoritative scriptural

sources. Dalmia concludes this essay by asking “What has changed in the course of the century that lies between us and Harishchandra to make heterogeneity seem a threat so overwhelming that it has become necessary to pit Hindu dharma against those projected as the wholly Other, the Muslims?” (p. 227).

Several essays in this volume are efforts to historicize and contextualize the development of Indology, in Europe and in India. The first essay in the volume traces ideas about India and Indian religion through the work of Johann Gottfried Herder, Friedrich Schlegel, and Max Müller, whose foundational contributions to Indology, spanning the whole of the second half of the nineteenth century, rested firmly in his understanding and valorization of the earliest Vedic literature. Other sources were of importance to Indian intellectuals (and some Europeans, as well), as we learn in “Vernacular Histories in Late-Nineteenth-Century Banaras: Folklore, Puranas, and the New Antiquarianism.” Local histories and folklore, ethnological documentation, and Puranic material were utilized in the pages of journals like *Indian Antiquary* (founded in 1872 by James Burgess) and in the Hindi literary journals of the 1870s under Harishchandra’s editorship. Dalmia examines Harishchandra’s histories of kingdoms and of castes. Although they were thoroughly Hindu histories, they were enriched by his “anthropologizing,” while later mainstream nationalist historiography chose to follow a different track, “cutting off the many untidy local odds and ends” (p. 136).

The history of Hindi language and literature is a central concern in a number of essays collected here. I focus on two substantial (and somewhat overlapping) essays that conclude the volume: “The Locations of Hindi” (originally published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 2003) and “Hindi, Nation, and Community” (the introduction to *Nationalism in the Vernacular: Hindi, Urdu, and the Literature of Indian Freedom*, 2010). These essays trace how Hindi became bifurcated from

Urdu in the course of the nineteenth century, while even in midcentury Hindi was still “in flux”—unstandardized, and yet to be Sanskritized or Hinduized (p. 311). The early twentieth century saw the construction of notions of Hindi as the language of North Indian Hindus, or even as a national language, and as a language used for religious and social reform and for the anti-British struggle. Dalmia insists on the need to go back to the history of the Hinduization of Hindi so as to acknowledge “the anti-Urdu stance which remains an inherently and durably troubling aspect of academic and institutional Hindi” (p. 337), at the same time acknowledging how Hindi allowed for the mobilization of new voices in the nationalist struggle and how it served as a major modernizing force for India, as well as continuing as an important vehicle for literary expression.

These essays, taken together, provide an important resource for our understanding of how Indian modernity and the nation have been crafted—but urge us to consider how this shaping has been undertaken in different ways and at different locations. How and when does the premodern or early modern shade into the modern? (And what does “early modern” really mean anyway?) Vasudha Dalmia’s micro-studies are gems of historical enterprise, as she takes off from particular texts to illuminate entire social/cultural/political contexts, with precious insights into where we are now and how we got here.

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