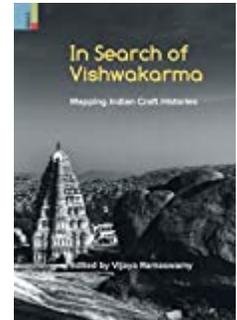


Vijaya Ramaswamy. *In Search of Vishwakarma: Mapping Indian Craft Histories.*
Delhi: Primus Books, 2019. x + 282 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-93-5290840-0.



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Published on H-Asia (July, 2021)

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Craft Histories in India

Vijaya Ramaswamy's edited volume is a most welcome addition to the literature on the social history of craftsmen in India. The "Vishwakarma" of the title is at once the name of the architect of the gods and the name used in many parts of India to refer to his human progeny, who are the builders, smiths, and craftsmen of this world. The volume originated in a conference entitled "Mapping Indian Craft Histories" held in Delhi in October 2014. The subject was not mapping in any literal sense (there are no maps in the volume) but, rather, in the sense of assembling a group of contributors who could address the topic from the perspective of different regions of India. The resulting essays address historical changes in the identity, status, and organization of craftsmen, based primarily on historical inscriptions but also informed, in several cases, by contemporary ethnographic work carried out by their authors. With essays ranging chronologically from the eleventh century to the present, and geographically embrac-

ing both northern and southern India, it is a uniquely rich resource, especially given the general neglect of the social history of craftsmen in India.

The volume consists of an introduction by Ramaswamy and thirteen essays, arranged in four loose groupings: "Reflections on the Vishwakarma" (with essays by Jaya Jaitly, George Varghese K., and R. N. Misra), "Caste and Mythologies of the Vishwakarma" (essays by Vijaya Ramaswamy, Jan Brouwer, and Kirin Narayan), "Northern Perspectives on the Vishwakarma," and "Southern Perspectives on the Vishwakarma." Although the rationale underlying the placement of the essays in the first two sections is not always clear, the arrangement of those in the last two sections works very well, not only with respect to the broad geographical distinction between north and south, but also with respect to the selection of essays within each section. Thus, the North India section is divided into three chronologically arranged

essays—pre-Sultanate (R. N. Misra), Sultanate (Pushpa Prasad), and Mughal (Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi)—while the South India section is arranged in accordance with linguistic geography, with one essay each devoted to the areas where Tamil (Y. Subbarayalu), Telugu (I. Lakshmi), Kannada (Nagendra Rao), and Malayalam (Anna Verghese) are spoken. Given the richness and diversity of this collection, it is not possible to summarize each of the contributions, so instead I will simply call attention to some of the patterns and themes that emerge from a careful reading of the volume.

One salient point has to do with the specific crafts that come to be classed under the rubric of the Vishwakarma. According to Ramaswamy, “the community of Vishwakarma smiths was comprised of five occupational groups—*tattan* (goldsmith), *kannan* (brass smith), *karuman* or *kollan* (blacksmith), *tachchan* (carpenter), and *shilpi* or *kal-tachchan* ([stone]mason)” (p. 58). Why this particular constellation of crafts? The grouping of five is found in every region of southern India, and they appear to be constant in their identification. Ramaswamy suggests that a common denominator is the connection of each of these five crafts with the processes of construction and maintenance of temples (p. 62). It was the need for these craftsmen to work in close proximity that would have led to groups of them being attached to various temples, and in many cases it would also have led to their workshops being physically located in the streets of the temple town. This shared residence and close collaboration would also have promoted a sense of shared group identity based on occupation rather than either caste or class (pp. 62-64). Similar patterns emerge from the testimony of epigraphs in different parts of southern India (Subbarayalu, p. 192; Lakshmi, p. 208; Anna Verghese, p. 243f).

Were the Vishwakarma a pan-Indian phenomenon? If we take this term as the inscriptions do—that is, as the name of a community whose members’ identity was based on their engagement

in one of the specific five crafts named above—then it is not clear that this was the case. While Vishwakarma communities in the strict sense were an important and influential group through all four of the South Indian linguistic regions and even up into Gujarat (the subject of Kirin Narayan’s essay), the term does not seem to appear at all in any of the essays in the section “Northern Perspectives on the Vishwakarma.” Instead, we find a deep history of various names and categories of craftsmen (such as *shilpi* or *takshaka*), some going back as far as the late Vedic literature and the era of the Pali canon (Misra) and coming up to the Sultanate period, in which many of the same names and terms occur, pointing to a general continuity of craft traditions even though new, Islamic building forms were becoming more common (Prasad). And in the Mughal period, we encounter new names and terms for architects (*muhandis*) and masons (*mi’mar*), as well as detailed information about wages and salaries—a natural corollary to the use of Persian as an administrative and courtly language in Mughal India (Nadeem Rezavi). If the rich data on various types of craftsmen contained in these three essays is at all representative, then it would appear that the Vishwakarma remain largely a southern phenomenon. This does not mean that these three essays are any the less relevant; quite the opposite, they provide an illuminating contrast to the Vishwakarma more strictly defined.

The subtitle of the volume, “Mapping Indian Craft Histories”, might suggest to some that the book is a history of Indian handicrafts, which it does not pretend to be. With one exception, all of the contributors are either historians or anthropologists; there are no craft historians or art historians more broadly conceived. (The one exception is Jaya Jaitly, the prominent crafts activist). Nor are there any illustrations of craft products (only four line drawings of masons marks and one black-and-white photograph of a Bharhut relief showing two sculptors). What the volume does offer, however, is a social history of one important category

of Indian craftsmen that has rarely received the attention it deserves. Vijaya Ramaswamy and her collaborators deserve our thanks for putting together such a helpful and thought-provoking volume.

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Citation: Phillip Wagoner. Review of Ramaswamy, Vijaya. *In Search of Vishwakarma: Mapping Indian Craft Histories*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. July, 2021.

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