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Anne Murphy (Ed.) *Time, History and the Religious Imaginary in South Asia*. London and New York: Routledge. 2011.

Time, History and the Religious Imaginary in South Asia is an eclectic collection of essays that explores the production of local historiographies from many different religious traditions of the subcontinent. The focus of the entirety of essays is the multiple perspectives on the process of the writing of history and what history-as-process means to our understanding of what history is and the function of history within the society from which it emerges. The wide range of traditions and regions that are presented within the volume implicitly constructs an interesting complex of varied yet related indigenous modes of “doing history.”

The strength of the volume is in the wide-range of topics, regions, styles, and traditions that it covers. The collection includes essays that most would classify by the traditions Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, Islamic, and Hinduism, but Murphy has carefully chosen scholars whose papers problematize these boundaries. It is precisely this emphasis on groups that transcend our neat and tidy taxonomies that effectively demonstrates how the process of indigenous historiography functions to establish a sense of place and being for such groups. The range of regions covered, which spans from Punjab to Bengal and back to the Western Deccan plateau, and the detailed level to which these regions are examined (as exemplified in an essay by Rajeev Kinra that very succinctly and effectively discusses Iranian Persian poetry in relation to the Indo-Persian *tāza* style) constitute the major appeal of this collection, though most essays, for better or worse, tend to focus on traditions typically designated within the fold of Hinduism. While it would have been great if the collection included something from South India, perhaps from Karnataka’s Jain, Kerala’s Christian, or Sri Lanka’s Buddhist traditions, the variety presented in *Time, History and Religious Imaginary* still surpasses most of similar collections on South Asia.

The wide range of materials, however, also results in one of the major drawbacks of the volume, namely the lack of thematic continuity from one essay to the next. This is first evident in Murphy’s “Introductory Essay.” In this very brief opening chapter, Murphy attempts to draw all of the authors’ works into one complete theoretical sphere, but she has to continually expand the scope of the sphere every time another author is mentioned. Eventually, this reviewer felt as though the theme that connected the essays was so broad that an essay seemingly only needed to mention religion and history to be included. This sense was particularly strong among the first three essays (Kinra, Dhavan, and Purohit) on Indo-Persian poetry, Sikh *gurbilas* texts, and Shia Ismaili *Dasavatār*, respectively. While all three essays are interesting, none of them develops any theory concerning the role of the literature under discussion as an indigenous historiography. Instead, the chapters remain descriptive pieces that introduce historically intriguing texts and style, leaving the reader to draw her own conclusions regarding the broader implications of such texts. This gap is highlighted by a few awkward and forced sentences about historiographical theory that have been inserted into the introductions of each of the essays and in which the authors ineffectually give nod to the themes of historiography and the “religious imaginary”¹ without saying anything of substance or successfully integrating such themes into the body of the essays. This reviewer speculates that this was perhaps an attempt to form a more coherent link between all of the essays in the volume, but, ultimately, it detracts from the theses and goals of each of the papers.

However, as the collection continues, the theoretical sophistication develops, and the authors reflect more intently on the concept of historiography within religious imaginaries and what such an intersection means for different communities, times, and cultures. The chapters by Mehri, Hagerty,

¹ According to the author, the “religious imaginary” is a way of “conceiving and structuring the world within the conceptual and imaginative traditions of the religious.”

and Novetzke (also Bhatia and Mandair, though because of time and space I will not discuss them directly) are fine examples of essays that are able to highlight the function of local literary forms in a local community's construction of its place within a larger nexus of a South Indian "historical imaginary," (i.e. the shared perspective from which practitioners of history approach it). Mehri demonstrates how the position of Parsis in colonial India led them to reconstruct themselves as the "true Persians," who were preserving the ancient practices of their homeland while simultaneously rejecting the homeland itself. Part and parcel of this project was the reconstruction of ancient Persia through a recreation of bygone practices and a "pure Persian" language, free of any words not found in ancient Persian texts. Thus, he shows how the creation of an ancient history can construct an authoritative identity for a diaspora community. Hagerty's succinct essay on the hagiographies of Guru Nanak is an interesting look at the creation and replication of a historiographical paradigm within the Sikh tradition. He suggests that his hagiographies exemplify the tradition's view of history as a cosmological, teleological process that directs South Asian notions of Purāṇic time toward the life of Guru Nanak. The only drawback of this essay is the lack of discussion of other texts from other traditions, which could have shed more light on literary and devotional context of the enlightened guru, who comes during the *kali yūga*.

Novetzke's chapter, "The theographic and the historiographic in an Indian sacred life story," most effectively discusses the themes of the collection in a clear and precise manner. In this essay, the author uses the story of Namdev and a Sultan to demonstrate the different modes of theography and historiography that exist within a hagiography. He argues that hagiographies are necessarily comprised of both modes, which have distinct concerns. The historiographic mode "generally seeks to represent the past faithfully and with a sense of causal linkages with other events by attending to the specifics of an event," while the theographic mode "engages what a story from the trove of sacred public memory can tell us about an issue of theological importance" (120). Thus, Novetzke uses the two modes as heuristic tools through which we can see the work they do within hagiographies, taking extrinsic data of kings, wars, births, and deaths and giving them intrinsic meaning for a particular insider audience. One might object to the value of making such a distinction within hagiographies when the modes are completely intertwined and virtually inseparable; however, his conclusions are meaningful, namely that pre-modern South Asian hagiographies are historiographical even though they, like Western histories (including those that reject the South Asian historiographic mode), introduce elements of the cultural context and society from which they emerge.

Overall, *Time, History and the Religious Imaginary in South Asia* is an interesting collection of a wide range of traditions and texts that deals with the construction of time, place, and identity within the religious landscapes of South Asia. It could be of use in an undergraduate course on South Asian historiography but is probably not theoretically advanced enough for a graduate seminar. It would make a great addition to any library, especially those with small South Asia collections, as the wide-range of topics it contains will add variety to any collection and would provide excellent recommended readings or a point of departure for research assignments for a course on the religions of South Asia.

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