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Bharati Puri

Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, Bharati.puri@gmail.com

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**Douglas Osto. *Power Wealth and Women in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*. London and New York: Routledge, 2011.**

Among a vast array of *MahāyānaSūtra*<sup>1</sup> works that express attitudes towards women, Douglas Osto's book on the *Gandavyuha Sutra*<sup>2</sup> (GS) illustrates the ways in which women are central to Buddhism. According to Osto, women participate at the highest level of enlightenment as *kalyāṇmitras* ("good friends," "spiritual friends," or "noble friends") to those in the pursuit of enlightenment (89). In the GS, many *kalyāṇmitras* assist Sudhana<sup>3</sup>, the text's central character, in his journey to enlightenment. Employing the narrative framework of Sudhana's journey, Osto's work focuses on women who have the power to bequeath wealth and who are special in various ways, but primarily so in terms of being endowed with beauty and wealth which are, according to the GS, a result of one's past good actions (88). The author cites Walsh (2007) on what is referred to as "one of the wonderful ironies of Buddhism" explaining through a series of metaphysical positions, how by renouncing wealth, ironically, material wealth can be accumulated. ." (26).

Because Buddhism favors the male, it often places women on the margins, often relegating them to a voiceless people. Despite this general tendency, one of the most powerful positive representations of women can be found in the GS, a Mahāyāna Buddhist scripture, which plays a significant role in highlighting Buddhism's unfortunate treatment of women. This text, in a way, revives a pledge that Buddhism began with—the conceiving of all humans as equal partners in suffering and in their seeking enlightenment in its shelter.

The author applies literary theory to draw a broad worldview of the text while exploring themes of power, wealth, and women in the GS. Adapting Umberto Eco's notion that texts are "ideologically overcoded," Osto undertakes a careful study of the GS to study how hierarchies—economic, social and political—can also become cosmic norms, saying: "*Mahāyānasūtras* were connected to patterns of patronage in ways that impacted their ideological formation" (13). He employs a systems approach to bring closer attention to show how a text can reveal the foundations of a particular religious practice and how these are shaped by the cultural environment in which a religion is practiced. For example, Osto's work explores the notion of "merit exchange," which can be means of acquiring status, power, and beauty in the cycle of birth and rebirth. In this context, "merit" is taken to be the effect of virtue and is central to the Buddhist theory of morality and agency. In merit exchange, through a mechanism of transaction, a donor can bestow what he or she owns in order to gain something in return, generating what Osto describes as an "ideology of merit" or "merit ideology," interchangeably (122). Merit functions in the GS as a type of "spiritual credit" (86), exchangeable for "treasures" (86).

The story in the GS is held together by the many encounters of Sudhana, who ventures forth on a journey in pursuit of supreme enlightenment. The story is placed in ancient India during the time of the Buddha. In his quest, Sudhana visits 53 different spiritual guides, or *kalyāṇmitras*, who teach him about the *bodhisattva's* path to enlightenment. He experiences a vision of an interpenetrating and inter-reflecting universe, where all time and space exist as a totality. In the GS, the *kalyāṇmitras* are found routinely among its wealthy, royal and female members are invariably and necessarily of extraordinary beauty (31-33). Vital to the construction of self in GS is the idea of the body "as always gendered and positioned within hierarchical structures" (15). The human body as a prevailing metaphor helps in drawing connections between "reinforcing the ontological relationship between wealth and a higher

spiritual dimension” (fn.16:182). The GS makes no avowals about the male body. (31). “The premium placed on physical attractiveness in the GS represents what Mrozik (cited on page 30) refers to as the ‘physiomoral discourse’ found in Indian Buddhist literature, which foregrounds the imperative and significance of attractive bodies for ethical and spiritual development (31). The GS glorifies bodies of the more advanced *kalyāṇmitras*, divulging to the reader an acknowledgement that beauty and attractiveness are at a premium and that spiritual hierarchy can depend on these factors (24).

The characters of GS are represented by a certain “social demographic”: the urban social elites who qualify as *kalyāṇmitras* (24). Among these, a sizeable proportion of the good friends are “wealthy, female and royal”(29). These female *kalyāṇmitras* come in different forms—queens, princesses, a nun, a courtesan, goddesses, and others—in powerful roles of teachers and spiritual guides. This list leaves the reader to wonder who the women were that the GS was actually trying to *exclude*. Was it excluding the ordinary women? The ordinary household woman is not flagged as part of the “spiritual elite”(72) who aid Sudhana in his journey towards enlightenment. As such, Osto could have explored the aspect of representation of the ordinary woman in the GS further.

Power, wealth, and gender are perennial concerns in GS. The author acknowledges and elaborates through his book, as to how the genius of the GS lies in its depiction of a merit ideology resulting in “social hierarchy, behavioral codes, power distribution, capital, legitimacy, wealth, transcendence, domination, subversion, happiness, social status” (Walsh, cited in Osto, p. 122) through the “entertaining story” of Sudhana’s quest for enlightenment. He qualifies the explanation further by suggesting that such an ideology would quite rightly qualify as a culturally produced object (3). The interpretation of literature as a system, in which the text is both a cultural product and a bibliographical code needs to be pursued also in terms of the authorial voice which was not adapted in this present work. Sudhana moves from one *kalyāṇmitrato* another,” as one *kalyāṇmitra* would only be able to teach Sudhana a certain *vimokṣa* (aspect of enlightenment) before urging him on to the next *kalyāṇmitrato* learn further. In this, because the authorial voice is perhaps lost it leaves a doubt about which voice the GS was privileging. The author has tried to make the text speak, but in a sense he also leaves the reader to navigate his or her own path.

Undoubtedly, this work is a valuable tool with which to approach the vast array of Buddhist literatures. Osto successfully shows the GS as a cultural product that is socially “embedded” in the culture that produced it. He also successfully ties in a systems approach to worldview analyses in examining this Mahāyāna text, which he sees as a method for studying other Mahāyāna works. The GS is a complex text on many accounts. It is also a text that is rich in details. Douglas Osto places this text under inquiry, laying out yet another method to pursue studies in scriptural Buddhism by employing methods from literary theory. Despite his overall success, however, there is a small but perhaps significant caveat—his methods also come with inbuilt flaws. The systems theory employed by the author has been debated and criticized. One of its criticisms is that it emphasizes certain perspectives while ignoring others. As such, the text cannot be seen as an infinitely open system. It would have provided additional knowledge to understand the consequences of ignoring certain perspectives while employing the theory in understanding a text like GS. In addition, there is a glaring error in the text in reference to Tabo monastery. To cite: “In the tenth century, the Tibetans painted images of Sudhana’s visits accompanied by a redacted text on the walls of the central shrine of Tabo monastery in western Tibet” (121). The author has cited scholars Fontein (1967), Gómez and Woodward (1981), and

Thakur (2006). However, Thakur (2006) does not mention that Tabo is in western Tibet in any part of his book; his work does not reflect this historical error. Tabo is in the Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh in India and not in Western Tibet. Thakur refers only to the western Himalayas in his works. As such, these should be seen as errors not amounting to shortcomings, in an otherwise excellent and detailed work, Osto's text is illustrative of Sudhana's journey. In exploring patterns of power and patronage and how they hold hands in creating texts and contexts, Osto's book has indicated larger questions in the domain of intellectual history of Buddhism. This book can easily be a standard text for any good graduate course in Buddhist Studies/Religion and Gender/Narrative Studies/Sociology of Religion.

Bharati Puri  
Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi  
[Bharati.puri@gmail.com](mailto:Bharati.puri@gmail.com)

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<sup>1</sup>Mahāyāna sutras are a broad genre of Buddhist scriptures that various traditions of Mahāyāna Buddhism accept as canonical.

<sup>2</sup>The Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra is the last chapter of the *Avatamsaka*, one of the most influential Mahayana sutras (a collection of rules or guidelines, compiled in the form of a manual or instructive text) of East Asian Buddhism. It details the pilgrimage of the youth Sudhana.

<sup>3</sup>Sudhana (a name meaning *good wealth* or possibly *pure wealth*) was a youth from India who was seeking enlightenment. At the behest of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, Sudhana takes a pilgrimage on his quest for enlightenment and studies under 53 "good friends" (those who direct one towards the Way to Enlightenment).