

Literary Cultures in History

With the volume *Literary Cultures in History* (edited by Sheldon Pollock), the study of Indian literature and South Asian culture and history takes a leap forward. The book is the result of over a decade's collaboration between scholars, most of whom are based at the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. The basis of this leap forward over previous works in this field is the book's pervasive critical reflection on the conceptualizations underlying any history of Indian literature, and the profound consequences of any theoretical preference for specific conceptualizations. This reflection is best indicated in the form of questions: (1) What is literature? (2) What is India or what is South Asia? Or, asked in a more general way: What is the (linguistic) community defined by a literature? From a different perspective this further implies: Which language does an author, or a community, choose for the purpose of literature? (3) What is history?

Review >
South Asia

By Jan Houben

In earlier works on the history of Indian literature, these questions have either been perfunctory dealt with, or they were not even asked. In his *History of Indian Literature*, for instance, S.K. Das simply states that literature comprises 'all major texts': in part 'fairy tales and tales of adventures, songs of various types and nursery rhymes' – in short, 'all memorable utterances' (cited after Pollock, p. 7). In the *Literary Cultures in History* project the literary is seen as 'a functional rather than an ontological category'; hence it refers to what 'people do with a text rather than something a text truly and everlastingly is' (Pollock, p. 9). However, what people do with a text varies according to the historical context. Hence, the focus came to be on the history of ('indigenous' or 'emic') definitions and views of literature. Delineating a community or area whose literature and language one wants to study poses specific problems: 'Boundaries of languages, cultures, societies, and politics that were created after the fact and in some cases very recently – boundaries that literary and linguistic processes in large part helped to create – have been taken as the condition of emergence and understanding of

these processes themselves' (p. 12). It became clear to the contributors that in South Asia '[b]orders of place and borders of language were as messy as they were elsewhere, until literature began its work of purification' (p. 17). The arrangement of the volume in five parts illustrates the pragmatic side of the response to this problem of delineation:

Part one, *Globalizing Literary Cultures*, consists of three chapters respectively on Sanskrit (Sheldon Pollock), Persian (Muzaffar Alam), and Indian-English literature (Vinay Dharwadker).

Part two, *Literature in Southern Locales*, consists of four chapters on Tamil (Norman Cutler), Kannada (D.R. Nagaraj), Telugu (Velcheru Narayana Rao), and Malayala literary culture (Rich Freeman).

Part three, *The Centrality of Borderlands*, consists of three chapters on the two histories (pre-colonial and colonial) of literary culture in Bengal (Sudipta Kaviraj), and on Gujarati (Sitamshu Yashaschandra) and Sindhi (Ali S. Asani) literary cultures.

Part four, *Buddhist Cultures and South Asian Literatures*, consists of three chapters on 'What is literature in Pali?' (Steven Collins), on Sinhala literary culture (Charles

Hallisey), and on the Indian literary identity in Tibet (Matthew T. Kapstein).

The final part is devoted to the twinned histories of Urdu and Hindi, with Shamsur Rahman Faruqi and Frances W. Pritchett writing on Urdu, and Stuart McGregor and Harish Trivedi writing on Hindi.

As can be seen, the volume clearly breaks away from earlier histories in not starting from a monolithic dominant Sanskrit literature but from the plurality of literatures in globalizing and vernacularizing languages.

In order to deal with the historical dimension, the authors decided to explore ‘how people have done things with the past’ and to take ‘seriously how different modes of temporality may have worked to structure South Asian literary cultures for the participants themselves’ (pp. 18–19).

The authors’ basic attitude consists of ‘listening to the questions the texts themselves raise ... rather than, like inquisitors, placing the texts in the dock and demanding that they answer the questions we bring to them.’ Adopting this fundamental openness made them enter a ‘zone of freedom’ when they ‘escaped literary history for the history of literary culture, committing [them]selves to taking South Asian people and their ideas seriously, and allowing for (potentially radical) South Asian difference’ (p. 13).

Pollock’s argument in his chapter ‘Sanskrit Literary Culture From The Inside Out’ (p. 55) that the dividing line between classical literature and ancient Vedic texts is ‘untranscendable’ is not entirely convincing. Apart from the continuities that can be perceived, the boundaries between the two have through the ages been frequently crossed by South Asian Sanskrit poets as well as by Vedic exegetes and grammarians.

While the authors are to be lauded for their effort to avoid ‘naturalizing categories – of time, place, language and community’ (p. 34), the volume fortunately contains a number of maps of South and Central Asia that are very helpful. What is missing is a synoptic table of authors and approximate dates. It would have increased the accessibility of the complex material for students, for whom this volume will otherwise be an excellent textbook. After all, there must have been some historical time when the paths of the authors and main actors in the various ‘literary cultures’ of the South Asian subcontinent occasionally crossed.

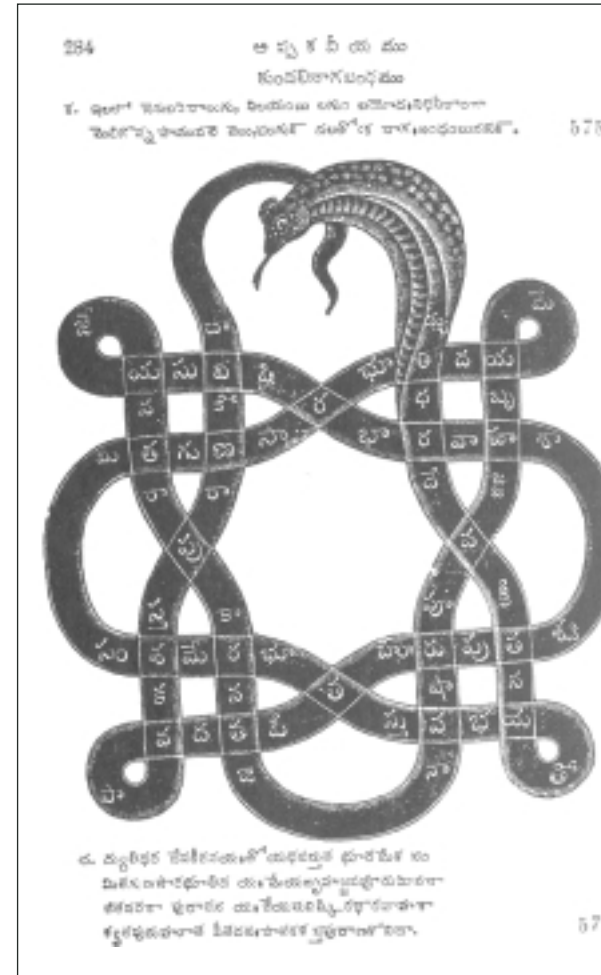
This volume is the result of individual contributors’ efforts and throughout shows their ‘fascination with the quest for learning how to listen’ (p. xix).

The novel presentation of information on literatures – which, like Sanskrit, Hindi, and Urdu, have been extensively explored, or, like Malayalam, have scarcely been researched to date – is surely laudable in itself. Nonetheless, the real plus value lies in the opening up of critical literary, social, and historical research questions, and in the stimulation of new, unexpectedly rich perceptions of South Asia through its literary cultures. ◀

- Pollock, Sheldon (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press (2003), pp. 1108, ISBN 0-5202-2821-9

Professor Jan E.M. Houben is affiliated to the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris Sorbonne*. His topics of interest are Sanskrit tradition of grammar and literature as well as Vedic ritual.

J_E_M_Houben@yahoo.com



Poem picture in the form of a coiled snake in a seventeenth-century work on Telugu poetics, discussed by V. Narayana Rao in his chapter in *Literary Cultures in History*. The poem is a prayer to Krishna and contains a large number of his names.

Kakunuri Appakavi (seventeenth century), *Appakaviyamu*, edited with a preface by Ravuri Dorasami Sarma, Madras: Vavilla Ramaswamy Sastrulu and Sons (1922). Picture is given on p. 576.