



Adheesh A. Sathaye. *Crossing the Lines of Caste: Visvāmītra and the Construction of Brahmin Power in Hindu Mythology.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 336 pp. \$36.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-934111-5.

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Caste Fluidity and the Cultural History of Hindu Brahmins

Caste is a constantly contested area in Indian studies. While some social scientists argue that the institution of caste is a needless creation by the privileged to oppress the marginalized, some postcolonial thinkers argue that the caste system has its merits and all the evils done in its name is because of not understanding its roots and functions. Some other scholars argue that caste was meant to be determined on the basis of one's occupation and qualities and caste became a problem only when the practice of determining caste on the basis of birth started. In politics, history, social sciences, and current affairs concerning India, caste has never lost its place of importance. Whether reservations in jobs and educational institutions based on caste should be provided is also another caste-based issue that periodically arises in India.

Though caste is generally seen as a rigid system of social stratification, particularly in India, one seldom comes across studies that present caste as a matter of choice or engage with the fluidity of caste. It is in this context that Adheesh A. Sathaye's *Crossing the Lines of Caste* assumes great significance. This book is the result of years of painstaking research in the intersections of caste and mythology, translation and Indology, and Hinduism and cultural studies. It is the result of Sathaye's doctoral research and we receive a glimpse of his engaging narrative when we read that this "book is about a legendary king who, on his own and through years of struggle, became a Brahmin" (p. xi).

That king is Viśvāmītra, whose fifteen legends from Sanskrit literature have been traced by Sathaye through new word-for-word English translations accompanied with detailed charts of the evolution of these stories, and all this is available on the companion website to the book: www.oup.com/us/crossingthelinesofcaste.

The sheer amount of work and scholarship that has gone into the writing of this book would easily baffle even the most erudite scholar of Sanskrit texts. This is evident throughout the volume, in which Sathaye provides copious quotes from the Sanskrit originals along with his lucid and accessible translations. He renews the long-forgotten art of glossing over texts that is quite important for situating ancient Indian texts and understanding their relevance to the present-day society. Sathaye positions this book as being "about Viśvāmītra, the development of his mythological persona through literature and performance, and the impact it has had on the cultural history of Brahminhood" (p. 2). One of the many strong points of this book is that Sathaye weaves a consistent and well-paced narrative that is exclusively drawn from Sanskrit sources but does not cumber the reader with archaic usage or jargon.

Sathaye has done a marvelous job of bringing home the point that spiritual austerities and tremendous willpower were represented as enabling one to cross the boundaries of caste as imposed upon one by birth. He also makes "the primary goal of this book" to uncover the

“historical significance” of the “deep ambivalence” and “social anxieties” that come up with Viśvāmītra’s appearance in Hindu myth (p. 5). Sathaye situates Viśvāmītra on the “fringes of the Hindu cultural imaginary as a lone-some master of ascetic practices” and as the “‘counter-normative figure in Hindu mythology” (p. 5). Sathaye explores David Herman’s concept of “storyworld,” where different identities are imposed on different persons in different times and spaces (p. 6). Thus, every reader creates a cumulative experience of the “storyworld” that varies according to one’s perceptions and culture. This entire process becomes a two-way path, where the narrative gains from the reader and vice versa. Sathaye also explores the conflicts created when a person attempts to cross the rigid boundaries of caste—which word he prefers to refer to in its Sanskrit original, *varṇa*, that has a more profound meaning.

Sathaye argues that personalities like Viśvāmītra do not have fixed narratives and that these characters have to be reconsidered time after time. He shows how the projection of Viśvāmītra’s personality in the mainstream myth has brought power to the Indian Brahmins. Sathaye analyzes, and in his own way critiques, the rigid caste ideologies that created social niches for the Brahmins and Kṣatriyas. He also shows how the creation and continuance of cultural practices and the production of various texts, also called *śāstras*, helped to maintain this social hierarchy. Sathaye refers to various theories of the caste structure in India and concludes that though there are differences among these theories and though other models of social stratification do exist in India, the Indian Brahminical hegemony has ensured that Brahmins are always seen as the group that wields power. Sathaye also argues that while the *śāstras* acted as “hermeneutic reference points,” in giving power to the Brahmins, “Sanskrit epics and purāṇas offered unusual cases that compelled the consumer to wrestle with the real-world applicability of such rules and regulations” (pp. 10–11).

This book is not just a study of caste structure in India nor is it just a study of the personality of Viśvāmītra. It is a guide to reading Sanskrit mythological texts in conjunction with their paratextuality in the form of folklores, songs, plays, and other kinds of performances. Sathaye calls the large corpus of research on Viśvāmītra “Viśvāmītra Studies” (p. 12). The pages of this book display Sathaye’s outstanding scholarship, not only of the huge Sanskrit Vedic and mythological literature but also of the colonial and postcolonial Indologists. If one were to read only this book and nothing else, one would obtain a fair and often in-depth understanding of the read-

ings and re-readings of Hindu mythology in general and of Viśvāmītra’s legends in particular.

Sathaye brings to the reader important ideas about the performance of texts through the works of various scholars and folklorists. He presents a methodology for adapting a text into a performance and shows the importance of the metamorphosis of a text into performance, the dissemination of the meaning of the text, and the relationships among the performers. Sathaye deals with the uncertainties regarding the transformation of oral histories into textual sources and vice versa, and he is dismayed that due to lack of evidence “we are left with a bit of a quandary” (p. 22). He suggests that it is better to not get into the argument of “whether or not an oral tradition preceded” these texts, and it would be wise instead to treat “the Sanskrit epics and purāṇas as they now appear: as written works of premodern literature” (p. 22).

Through this book, Sathaye immerses the reader into narratives from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. Elsewhere, Sathaye has studied the character of Mādhavī as an exhibit in the *Mahābhārata*, which he considers a museum.[1] He has shown there and in this book his ability to extract a meaningful interpretation of the various subnarratives hidden in Sanskrit epics. He is confident that the composers of *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* “had an intertextual debate” about Viśvāmītra (p. 68). Sathaye explores the nature of “ascetic power, how might it be gained, lost, and controlled, and what is its potential for drastic and violent change?” (pp. 78–79).

This book is divided into three sections of two chapters each: “Foundations,” “Adaptations,” and “Confrontations.” Chapters 1 and 2 trace Viśvāmītra legends in the *Vedas* and Sanskrit epics and draw a genealogy of the “Brahmin Other” in these epics. In chapter 3, Sathaye studies the “political and religious valences of Viśvāmītra in the early purāṇas” (p. 29). In chapter 4, he analyzes the “geo-mapping” of the legends of Viśvāmītra to various sites on the banks of rivers. Through this exercise, Sathaye effortlessly gets into a study of the regional cultures of erstwhile India. He examines how medieval Sanskrit literature showed Viśvāmītra as “the transgressive but merciful Brahmin Other” in order “to extend Brahminical authority onto pilgrimage sites across the subcontinent” and “to construct new, regionalized inflections of Brahmin social power” (p. 141).

Chapter 5 deals with cultural perceptions of the apparent villainy of Viśvāmītra, analyzing Sanskrit and Marathi sources, to understand the different ways in which the sage was portrayed, either as a tough taskmas-

ter or as a Brahmin full of egotism. Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, traces the different avatars of Viśvāmitra until the present day, as portrayed by traditional performances and popular media. His depictions in the Marathi storytelling tradition of *nārādīya kīrtan* is also dealt with.

Sathaye argues that though Viśvāmitra became a Brahmin, later “epics deployed Viśvāmitra to represent the ‘Other’ kind of Brahmin, as someone to be respected and feared but *not* to be emulated. Brahmins were encouraged instead to model themselves on normative figures like Vasiṣṭha, who were shown to be best suited for elite ministerial positions within the early Indian state. And for non-Brahmin audiences, the Brahmin Other served as a stern warning against disrespecting Brahmins of any sort” (p. 62).

Sathaye concludes this book by drawing attention to some broader implications of his work on the historicity of the performances of Hindu mythology and to the need for deeply studying Hindu mythological culture and its social, political, and religious importance. Sathaye laces the entire book with tables that detail the spread of Viśvāmitra legends and the various geographical sites

associated with different legends. A catalogue of these legends at the end of the book comes as a great help to those interested to study them in detail. Throughout the book, he gives different versions of the popular legends associated with Viśvāmitra in text boxes. This book is also the closest one can come to a biography of Viśvāmitra, though Sathaye prefers to call it “the cultural history of the stories that Vedic Brahmins told about him” (p. 40).

This book is an example of how well cultural history can be written along with a critical analysis of textual sources. This book explores the various facets of the Hindu Brahmin identity and its relevance in the present. This book is a great resource for scholars of Sanskrit, Hinduism, mythology, social stratification, folklore, performance, translation, cultural studies, and Indian studies in general, and for scholars of Viśvāmitra in particular.

Note

[1]. Adheesh Sathaye, “Pride and Prostitution: Making Sense of the Mādhavī Exhibit in the Mahābhārata Museum,” in *Argument and Design: The Unity of the Mahābhārata*, ed. Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 237–74.

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