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## Introduction

Serena Bindi, Elena Mucciarelli, Tiziana Pontillo

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## Cross-cutting South Asian Studies

# Cross-cutting South Asian Studies

## An Interdisciplinary Approach

*edited by*

**Serena Bindi**  
**Elena Mucciarelli**  
**Tiziana Pontillo**



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## Introduction

THIS volume is based on the results of different research activities carried out mainly at Cagliari University and focuses on two themes that are central to Indological studies: religious practices and heterodox sovereignty.

### **Part I: The Indian Ocean of Religious Practices: Past and Present, edited by Serena Bindi and Elena Mucciarelli**

The original pieces of research presented in the first part of the volume focus on the topic of religious practices in South Asia. The main aim of this part is to highlight the heuristic potential of a specific methodological approach to the study of Asia: these papers have been presented and discussed in depth in interdisciplinary research seminars, where south Asian specialists of different historical periods and disciplines engaged in fruitful debates which deliberately cross-cut disciplinary and historical boundaries. For this reason, the academic backgrounds of the authors cover a wide range of disciplines including Indology, religious studies, social anthropology, social and intellectual history, and linguistics; additionally, the time-spans involved in these articles stretch from the Vedic period to the contemporary epoch, passing through medieval times.

Before coming to the contents of the contributions, it is necessary to say a few words on the methodology which has given birth to these articles and the research network which has allowed such methodology to be put into practice.

## Methodological Approach Cross-cutting South Asian Studies

A first version of the papers contained in this part of the book was presented at the “Cross-cutting Asian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach” conference, organized in Cagliari in June 2012. On this occasion, scholars from different disciplines participated in extensive discussions with colleagues from other disciplinary fields, but all of whom shared the same interest in a certain topic.

The conference was a product of the specific methodology that is part of The Coffee Break Project, an international network of Asian Studies.<sup>1</sup> In 2010, thanks to the initiative of a group of young scholars from a range of different institutions and disciplinary fields, this network was able to broaden its horizons. The main pillar of this research group is the firm belief in the benefits of two methodological stances: the exercise of the interdisciplinary approach and the practice of extensive discussions. This network of scholars has already organized several conferences which, on every occasion, have succeeded in favoring an open-minded exchange of ideas, suggestions, and criticisms. In reality, this methodological choice is the reason why the conferences arranged by this group of scholars were given the name Coffee Break Conferences. The idea lying behind this uncommon title is, as pointed out by Elisa Freschi, et al. (2011: 39):

The commonsensical statement that the most interesting parts of a conference are the coffee breaks [...] one often takes part in challenging and fascinating debates while sipping at one's cup of coffee.

Taking the challenge posed by this statement seriously, the conferences invite participants to put aside the inflexible formulations that dominate many academic debates and encourage them to share unsolved methodological or epistemological problems in a climate of fruitful informality.

<sup>1</sup> See the web page <http://asiaticacoffeekbreak.wordpress.com>.

This procedure entails several benefits. Multidisciplinary in scope, such methodology encourages connections and dialogues between scholars who are concerned with the studies of antiquity and modernity in Asia. Hence, for example, the study of a topic, such as religion and power in Asia, might be renovated by bringing together the methods and findings of social sciences with those of classical Indology.<sup>2</sup> In this part, Dębicka-Borek approaches the study of an initiation cult through a philological method which is integrated with anthropological insights from Victor Turner. In the same way, Bignami makes use of epigraphic data and tries to analyse them through the historical interpretation provided by Kulke. Daniela Bevilacqua's article offers another clear example of how contributions and insights stemming from different disciplines – Indology, history, as well as social sciences – can be used complementarily in order to shed light on a specific topic, in this case, the relationship between devotional religion and caste society in India. Likewise, Serena Bindi complements the fieldwork method and anthropological literature by drawing upon religious studies and Indological sources in order to tackle the issues of belief, doubt, and reflexivity in the central Himalayan region.

It is useful to bear in mind that the possibilities of this interdisciplinary dialogue are extremely rich. Indeed, even when scholars cannot share contents, methodological concerns can be shared and their proposers can benefit from this process.

Finally, although this interdisciplinary approach is not new, the ways of implementing and putting it into practice are still a work

<sup>2</sup> Such an approach was already fruitfully applied in the 1960s by Louis Dumont (1967) at the Centre for South Asian Studies (Centre d'Études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud – CEIAS) in Paris. He had created the Centre in the mid-1950s, with the aim of renovating the study of India by uniting the methods and findings of social sciences with those of classical Indology. This approach is still implemented in the work of several scholars, such as Michaels (1998), Doniger (2009), O'Flaherty (1984), and Squarcini (2011).



in progress. The question still remains as to how far, how deep, and within which frameworks and institutions scholars from different research fields can share their concerns and methods. This part of the book is the product of one of the arenas where this dialogue was made possible.

### Religion and Power in South Asia

All the articles of this section deal with different issues related to religious practices and institutions in South Asia. In addition to the fact that they all address the field of religion, these contributions also share a similar theoretical perspective on religion: they all highlight, in various ways and through different disciplinary approaches, how, in order to fully understand religious practices and their inherent dynamics, it is essential to consider the power relations that continually imbue and shape them. The three articles by Elena Mucciarelli, Ewa Dębicka-Borek, and Cristina Bignami examine the processes of mingling and assimilation between practices and beliefs that characterized the so-called “Vedic” and “Hindu” religions. These three contributions highlight how such a development was strongly influenced by hierarchical patterns. Power dynamics are also at the very centre of the fourth article, by Daniela Bevilacqua, which shows how a religious sect has historically dealt with, and indeed still continues to apprehend, the issue of caste society. This part ends with a study by Serena Bindi in which the topics of religion and power are articulated in order to show how powerful discourses are used to protect the local ritual system from collapsing when confronted with ritual failures and internal scepticisms.

### About the Contributions

Elena Mucciarelli’s contribution deals with the Vedic period and although it does not consider two different religious streams, it still tries to question the idea of a single Vedic religion. This approach has been adopted by many scholars over the last decades, and has already resulted in a wider and more accurate understanding of the

ancient cults among the tribes of northern India in the period that extends from 1500 BCE to CE 500. Mucciarelli’s contribution focuses in particular on the two goddesses, namely Vāc and Sarasvatī, and attempts to analyse their features in the chronological strata, i.e. the old and middle Vedic periods. Examining the differences within historical development, the author aims at giving some pieces of evidence to show that both goddesses underwent a significant change as to their representation and role, particularly with regard to *Rgveda Samhitā* on the one hand, and the later Samhitās and Brāhmaṇas on the other. Finally, she focuses on the different perceptions of the concept of fertility in connection with both Vāc and Sarasvatī, and the latter aspect also entails the comparison with a different social stratum from that of the Brahmanical priesthood.

Considering the initiation ceremony from both an anthropological and a philological point of view, Ewa Dębicka-Borek approaches the problem of the definition of conversion and initiation in the Indian context. Furthermore, she traces a connection to the process of assimilation of communities representing the so-called Little Tradition into the so-called Great Tradition of the Hindu community. This contribution concentrates on the medieval period in south India and examines exchanges between different religious streams. In particular, with regard to the Śaiva fold, an important role was played by the *liṅgoddhāra* (the removal of sectarian characteristics) that might have allowed Buddhists, Jainas, Vedāntins, Vaiṣṇavas, and members of the then heretical sects of Śaivism Pāśupatas and Mahāvratas, to join the Śaiva-Siddhānta sect. A similar situation emerges for the Vaiṣṇava fold. As a specific case study, the author focuses on the Narasimha initiation (*narasimhadīkṣā*), which might be an example of conversion. According to the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Sātvata Samhitā*, this rite must be performed by those who does not belong to the tradition or at least by those who do not obey the customary norms respected by the Vaiṣṇava Pāñcarātra. Moreover, applying Turner’s categories of pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal, the figure of Narasimha seems to contain all the

markers of liminality. According to Soifer's analysis (1992), the fact that Narasimha's liminality undergoes some changes is of extreme interest within the issue of religious exchanges. He becomes a link between the orthodox, Vedic, and Upaniṣadic religions and *bhakti* cults, and remains in transition between the two worlds (Soifer 1992:106). Dębicka-Borek presents this interpretation and suggests a fascinating explanation for the use of Narasimha in the Vaiṣṇava rites. These rites are also addressed to Śaiva devotees: Narasimha is not only a liminal figure in himself, but is an expression of Śiva overpowering Viṣṇu. Finally, the contribution also stresses another important aspect of the Man-Lion, namely, its connection to the local rituals and myths due to its terrific and dangerous character.

The local myths in medieval south India are also the core of **Bignami's** contribution. In particular, the author examines the process of royal legitimation in Karnataka during the kingdom in the first half of the twelfth century. The article presents an epigraphic and artistic analysis of some temples built by the king after his conquests. The contribution focuses especially on a peculiar iconographic choice, namely, the Madanikās, a set of steles representing a female character. The Madanikās are a characteristic feature of the Cennakeśava Temple at Belur, but can also be seen in several other temples erected by the same king in the following years. Bignami proposes that the feminine figure represented in different forms in each of the 245 steles in the Cennakeśava Temple might be connected with the foundation legend of the dynasty. The legend, as attested by the inscriptions, shows the local goddess turning into the goddess Vāsantikā and giving the land to the first Hoysaḷa king. Here the local cult is mingled with Sanskritic elements in order to fit political interests. The author further examines the inscriptions on twenty steles and the connection between the engravings indicating the artists' birthplaces under the Mandanikās and the king's territorial expansion. The localization of all the places named in the inscriptions, in particular of those in the northern part, proves to be an important piece of evidence. Indeed, the fact that the

king deliberately chose to let the artists indicate their provenance was by no means a casual variation of common usage, but rather an intentional exception meant to show the extent of the king's conquests. The latter consideration provides a decisive clue for the interpretation of the female figure and the inscriptions. They are likely to be tools for royal propaganda and, consequently, an indication of how the local cults were part of a political discourse.

The main objective of Daniela **Bevilacqua's** article is to discuss the relation between caste society and the Rāmānandī Sampradāya devotional order. The article starts by pointing out how an absolute refusal of caste differentiations is traditionally attributed to the founder of the sect. This revolutionary approach to Indian society is well exemplified by the sentence which gives the title to the article and which is considered by several sources to be the main teaching of the order's founder: "Do Not Ask about Caste If You Love God, You Belong to God." The author, however, formulates the hypothesis that the caste system is so relevant in Indian society that it must have necessarily influenced the life and actions of the founder of the sect. As a consequence, it must have contributed – and indeed continues to contribute – in shaping the practices of the sect. This hypothesis is verified by the author through the extensive use of different methodologies and different sources (historical, textual and anthropological). This multidisciplinary approach allows Bevilacqua to reconstruct the sect's attitude towards the caste system in different epochs and to analyse its development throughout the centuries. In the last part of the article, she describes the contemporary point of view on the caste system adopted by the Jagadguru Ramanandacharya Ramnareshacharya, the present religious leader of the Rāmānandī Sampradāya, using ethnographical data gathered during her own fieldwork.

Contemporary religious practices and institutions are also at the centre of Serena **Bindi's** article. Based on anthropological fieldwork carried out in a mountain region in the state of Uttarakhand, the article addresses the issues of religious reflexivity, scepticism, and

explanations for ritual failure. Religious reflexivity refers to the way in which religious ideas and actions become the object of reflection amongst the people participating in ritual activities. In particular, the article points out the ways in which the failure of healing rituals involving spiritual possession is often attributed to the people's lack of belief in deities and in the efficacy of ritual. The author proposes an insight into how these forms of "meta-reflexivity" – that is to say, denouncing people's reflexive attitudes, such as doubt and scepticism – produce multiple effects. These reflexive attitudes allow doubt to exist and make it useful in order to justify ritual failures, while containing it within acceptable limits. The author points out that whereas reflexive attitudes are features common to all religious practices, reflexive behaviours take a different form depending on the local context. In this respect, the paper highlights how the specific form of reflexivity found in Garhwal can only be explained in connection with the strong devotional attitudes which imbue the local practices of spiritual possession.

**Part 2: Kings, Priests and Prominent Roles Interpreted through the Visual, Literary, Speculative, and Technical Indian Arts, edited by Tiziana Pontillo**

This second part seeks to substantiate the well-known opposition between the so-called orthodox sovereignty and the heterodox one, of which the so-called *vrātya*-power seems to be a prime example.<sup>3</sup> This *vrātya*-leadership occurred at a previous historical stage, during which warrior/sacrificer and priest/officiant might have cyclically changed roles with each other, according to Heesterman's (1993) reconstruction. Furthermore, it is here assumed as being the cultural

<sup>3</sup> The work aims to further interdisciplinary cooperation between the study of speculative and literary texts and that of technical and artistic sources, within the context of the three-year EU Research Project titled "Traces of a Heterodox Concept of Kingship in Ancient, Medieval and Modern India", financed by the Regione Autonoma della Sardegna and co-ordinated by Tiziana Pontillo at the Philology, Literature and Linguistics Department of the University of Cagliari.

expression of a possible ancient wave of Indo-Aryan speakers – considered in Parpola's (1983; 2012) historical framework – that slowly moved towards the eastern part of the Indo-Gangetic plain, i.e. towards the area of the so-called Greater Magadha. Thus, the orthodox rigid division of roles at birth, which is well-documented in later times, is read as the effect of a reform which replaced the afore-mentioned complex and unstable sacrificial pattern (and the closely dependent social system) on the basis of a regulated agreement between prominent groups.

Therefore, the target of the relevant contributions consists in focusing on different contexts where the king or chieftain, or merely the patron of the sacrifice, gains his temporary pre-eminence in an agonistic way which includes an important non-permanent ascetic dimension.

This sort of consecrated warrior, who was ready to offer his life in the sacrifice of war to grant prosperity to his comrades, might have constituted the single remote Indo-Aryan (non-Vedic) ancestor of the two categories of ascetics which, by contrast, were reconstructed as originally being different in Bronkhorst's (2007) and Olivelle's (2011) studies, namely, the sedentary forest hermits and the itinerant (and mendicant) world renouncers. In other words, the quite different Brahmanic hermit version of the ascetic might actually depend on a secondary (partially mutual) distancing between the two ectypes of the (Māgadha-)renouncer prototype, which was markedly determined by the fresh contribution of a later distinct Indo-Aryan wave in north-western continental India.

On the other hand, the volatile *status* of existence which descends from the competitive pattern of leadership is extended beyond the strictly human society, since it appears to comprehend all beings, as a possible "trace of a more archaic world-view" where even animals might have been "less categorically distinguished from humans" (cf. Schmithausen 2000). Moreover the gods themselves have to gain their access to Heaven (Witzel 1984), meaning that the heroic warrior/ascetic way of life must often be

interpreted as a specific attainable accessway to heaven, which is a human alternative with respect to the ritualistic option. Indeed, this possibility might allude to the self-proclaimed god-like status (as a “particular blend of ascetic and ritual aspects of divinity”) of some epic heroes such as Duryodhana or of the highest god Kṛṣṇa, as clearly highlighted by Angelika Malinar (2007: 36, 47ff.; 2012: 59, 75).

Inasmuch as some late traces of this conception of the pre-eminence as an ascetic achievement are even found in classical poetry or in later documents, one is brought to believe that the so-called Brahmanic reform was neither actually all-embracing nor perhaps long-lasting, which calls for further and more in-depth investigations.

### About the Contributions

The first two authors have courageously chosen broad boundaries for their subject of inquiry in terms of both the chronological and geographic perspective. Indeed, their reflection encompasses the so-called orthodox and ancient heterodox Indian traditions, which thereby virtually comprehend more than 1,000 years of the history of continental India from the extreme north-western area right up to the Magadha region.

The reconstruction of “the system through which the brāhmaṇas realized their goal to make *yajña* a symbolic practice for honouring and satisfying gods in the forms of the precepts we know from the prose texts”, proposed by Marianna **Ferrara**, finds its well-founded historical starting-point in the precise circumstance of the lack of documents that can testify to the existence of a pan-Brahmanic unitary tendency before fourth century BCE. As a consequence, her survey of the Ṛgvedic occurrences of the verb *hu-*, and particularly of the *parasmaipada* and *ātmanepada* forms of *yaj-* with the parallel semantic shift of the term *yajña* she analyses, is correctly evaluated as a collection of ordered pieces of evidence of the changing “political and economical implications

related to the practice of *yajña*”. Therefore, the central importance of *yajña* in the later “reformed” textual tradition clearly emerges as a mere secondary Brahmanic achievement. This is actually the “historical development of a political tool used among rival poets”, which was adopted at a certain age as a means of gaining the favour of the auspicious mighty client of the *yajña*-practice. This happened because the technical control of the *yajña* procedure had been undisputedly subtracted from the competences of the candidate agent of the relevant action. In fact, in former times, whosoever aimed at playing the sacrificer role (*yajamāna*) could actually become a sacrificer. By contrast, the whole practice was later exclusively committed to a single class, namely that of the officiants, who were auto-legitimated to carry it out, merely because a collective canonical collection of precepts was being slowly fixed at that time.

The comparison between the different sources available on similar or even shared stories proposed by Giacomo **Benedetti** is analogously free of prejudgements, which, in this case, are those concerning the rigid division between Buddhist and Brahmanic (Vedic and Epic) traditions. The hypothesis of an archetypal figure of *ṛṣi* is postulated, which intriguingly does not entail a ritualistic attitude. Thus, for instance, the crucial role of the vision of the sacred and effective *mantras* extolled in the Vedic texts, and, on the other hand, the miraculous meditative state which was so assiduously sought after by monks might both have prototypically been an early supernatural power of apperception and knowledge acquired by ascetics after a long training in meditation and austerities. Indeed the *ṛṣi*’ power of controlling death through *dhyāna-yoga* and the fear that virtues and accumulated merits inspired in divine beings such as Sakka/Śakra (Indra) are only two of the promising details of the *ṛṣi*’ achievements highlighted here.

These features perhaps deserve to be paid due attention as plausible pieces of evidence for the supposed ancient Indo-Āryan belief in the human chance of having access to the divine status.

This is what is discussed by Moreno **Dore** in his reconstruction of the most ancient Vrātya culture. He offers a reinterpretation of an often commented upon hymn, the 2.1 of *Atharvaveda* (Śaunakīya), and in particular of the role of the Gandharva. The latter being is a possessor of secrets and esoteric knowledge and, through the analysis of his role as a teacher and a father, Dore aims to prove that a different kind of relationship between men and gods is clearly depicted in the context of the hymn. By making a comparison between the figures of the Vrātya, the Keśin, and the Brahmacārin, the author highlights the poets' intention to place these extraordinary men in the divine pantheon. We seem to be dealing with a sort of "replacement": a divine role is available and the wise man occupies it, by transfiguring himself into a god. This is a human chance – presented by the poet of AV 2.1 through the Gandharva archetypal model – which has to be classified as a peculiar trait of the *vrātya*-ideology. It is thus tempting to consider this hymn as a kind of speculative manifesto for adherents to the so-called *vrātya*-life.

The destiny of shining in heaven in the afterlife is also the award reserved for the *bhāryā pativrātā* (a wife whose vow is her husband) (MBh 1.68.45; 12.144.9; 145.14), as highlighted in **Pisano's** paper. The author carefully considers the Sanskrit epic references to the custom of *sahagamana* (going together), i.e. to the devoted wife's practice of following her husband through all situations of life, death included, and their possible connections with some ancient Greek texts dealing with similar acts. According to *Mahābhārata*, the women who burn themselves on their husband's funeral pyre mainly seem to be the wives of kings who rule over particular areas of north India, who are all related by close family ties. Furthermore, *sahagamana* is a willing and optional practice, as can be inferred from the behaviour of Pāṇḍu's, Vasudeva's, and Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva's widows. Analogously, from the fifth century BCE onward, ancient Greek authors, such as Herodotus, Euripides, Diodorus of Sicily, Strabo, and Pausanias, mention or describe further examples of women (particularly Indian and Peloponnesian

ones) who follow their husbands when they die. They are also generally noble women or wives of kings. Thus the crucial point seems to be the heroic feature of these women's behaviour, which sounds quite different from the orthodox Brahmanical custom of the so-called *satī*, mentioned in Dharmasūtras and Dharmasāstras. The author insightfully assumes that "*sahagamana* had probably been abolished at the time of the Saṁhitās, but continued to be regarded as a respectable custom of olden times" and "to be practised outside the Brahmanical sphere" by considering the evidence that the wives of several other ancient Indo-European speaking peoples, such as the Thracians, Scythians, Germans, and Slavs, used to follow their husbands in death in various ways. Moreover, the Vedic Saṁhitās also record this deadly practice (RV X.18.8; AVŚ 18.3.1-2), even though it was ritually replaced with a virtual and symbolic one. By adopting Asko Parpola's thesis regarding different waves of Aryan immigrants, it seems almost reasonable to assume that a genuine Indo-Aryan custom dating back to the so-called "first wave" became a marginal reality concerning "only a few kṣatriya circles" and also "geographically confined to the north-western regions", when the second Indo-Aryan wave arrived from the Swāt valley. As a consequence, the relevant record of Alexander's historians (fourth century BCE) might indeed match with this ancient heroic (possibly *vrātya*) tradition.

A joint paper by **Sudyka** and **Pontillo** focuses on the long life of some frequent literary *rūpaka*-compounds, such as *narasimha* or *puruṣavyāghra*, which are supposed to constitute a sort of *sphragis* of the archaic Indo-Aryan warrior brotherhood, i.e. of the so-called *vrātya* culture, according to the results of some recent research by Yaroslav Vassilkov. From the technical (grammar and poetics) point of view, the authors verify whether these expressions can actually be interpreted as identifications between a mighty animal and a powerful king or a terrific warrior, at least as far as the original Vedic contexts are concerned. The durability of this kind of imagery – above all of the lion-warrior association – is

testified by the occurrences taken from Sanskrit *mahākāvya*s and medieval inscriptions, where “the ‘lionness’ of the warriors creates the aura of wonder and admiration for their heroism” in every being, and causes uncontrolled fear in their enemies. What is more intriguing is the consistency of the animal symbolism involved in the depiction of this kind of warrior in Vedic, Epic, and Kāvya-poetry, and some features of specific *bhakti*-rites documented (especially by Sontheimer’s research from 1980 onwards) among the semi-nomadic pastoralist tribes in Deccan and south India, devoted to a god who is also simultaneously the leader of the young warriors’ group.

Indeed, two contributions are entirely devoted to two important Kāvya depictions of the kingship authored by Kālidāsa.

Giuliano **Boccali**’s insightful comment on Kālidāsa’s *Kumārasambhava* I.1-17 concentrates on a special kind of king, namely the greatest of mountains, which – by means of different facets of its description – is presented both as the cosmic mountain, the axis of the world, and as the human universal sovereign, i.e. the *cakravartin*. Its dimensions and strength are emphasized as requisites for its sovereignty, and the extension of the relevant empire – from one ocean to the other – is greatly extolled. None the less, it is the performance of the final rite of consecration that allows the mountain to achieve pre-eminence, and furthermore, it is this selfsame mountain that abundantly produces the indispensable materials (wood, etc.) for this sacrifice. Thus, by granting riches and therapeutic gemstones and herbs, it is indeed the source of the sacred role of kings and of the very life of their subjects. As a consequence, the natural, almost wild, Himalayan landscape, which is anthropomorphically transfigured as a valiant king, hints at a further level of the poetical description of the mountain as a sort of supernatural heavenly world, and ultimately, prosperity (*saubhāgya*-) can come from this world alone. The earliest conception of the divine status of king is thus almost automatically suggested, especially if we remember that the motionless mountain

is the recurrent standard of comparison for the ascetics and their mind in the epics and Jaina texts (see Bronkhorst 2007: 19-20, 25-27).

Asceticism and a warrior-like attitude also constitute a very interesting pair of contrasting qualities attributed to the ideal king singled out by Marco **Franceschini** in *Raghuvamśa*. In other words, “the overpowering vehemence as a conqueror” who aims at constantly providing all his people with peace and prosperity, and the “gracious disposition toward his subjects”, aimed at removing the causes of their affliction. Kālidāsa represents these opposite properties as sea monsters and sea gems respectively, where the sea is the standard of comparison for the king. Quite often the poet depicts the same pair of auspicious kingly qualities as the sun’s fiery strength and the moon’s cool comfort respectively. In this way, he makes the ascetics’ virtues and warriors’ attitude overlap, thereby mirroring their actual coexistence in the kingly figure of the majority of Raghu’s descendants. It is noteworthy that the solar imagery devoted to portraying the inspired heroic leader and his warrior/ascetic attitude – emphasized poetically by Kālidāsa – might also owe its efficacy and pervasiveness to that part of the self-transforming Vedic and epic leadership which is beyond the orthodox and hereditary path.

Fabrizia **Baldissera**’s contribution is focused on the royal worship of the Great Goddess that arose in the first and second century CE, i.e. when the legitimation for kings was becoming a pressing exigency – especially as far as newly founded kingdoms and non-kṣatriya aspirant kings were concerned. Therefore, the volatile feature of kingly power results as a topical and urgent fact, which practically comes about in the same age as when the *Mānavadharmasāstra* institutes the compulsory duty of protecting the whole world for the consecrated kṣatriyas (7.2). Moreover, this was also the time when this work promulgated the divine status of king, by resorting to the earliest identification of the chieftain with Fire and/or the Sun, upon which “no one on earth can bear

to gaze” (7.6). The close cyclical interrelationship between the Indian necessity of locally founding social and religious power outside of the hereditary pattern and the emergency of “the political importance of integrating [. . .] the deities of the people living on its fringes, in forests and mountains” is solidly and not banally represented by the recurrent icon of the immortal pair of king/Devī that is constantly transformed in the multicultural and multi-ethnic framework of the millenarian Indian history.

Just how long and how far this mutual necessity can continue to last in the official representation of kingship is testified by the emphasis placed on the female water element (symbolized as the image of the three-headed white elephant) as a balanced counterpart for the fiery nature of kings in one of the nineteenth-century Siamese temperas at the “Cardu” Museum in Cagliari, which Ruben Fais analyses by constantly referring to their literary reference source, i.e. the Siamese version of Indian *Rāmāyaṇa* called *Rāmakien*. The importance of linking the sacred story of a hero-god, the mythical ideal ruler who is intentionally homonymous with all the kings of the Cakrī dynasty of Thailand – who are thus all identified (some of them obviously posthumously) with King/God Rāma according to Rāma VI’s will – is therefore confirmed in the artistic documents of the Siamese royal propaganda of the nineteenth century CE. This appears to be a proud statement of a close relationship between today’s modern and free Bangkok and the ancient Indian tradition, and actually seems to be aimed at rebuking Burmese and European people for their imperialistic pretences.

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