Review Of "Devotional Poetics And The Indian Sublime" By V. Mishra

Steven P. Hopkins
Swarthmore College, shopkins1@swarthmore.edu

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Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime by Vijay Mishra: Rob Wilson
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still remains to be reconceptualized within Indian feminism, like the role of pleasure
in sexuality, the place of lesbianism in the politics of engagements, and animal
symbolism in the cultural imaginary that is an inevitable part of all radical enterprise.

By bringing together only a few of the thoughtful, provocative, and erudite essays
produced by an entire generation of Indian feminists, this volume does very good
service to the Indian women's movements as well as to scholarship on modern South
Asia. Its best achievement is that it sacrifices neither philosophical rigor nor passionate
advocacy around issues that affect women in different ways. The only note of caution
I would sound would be regarding the typos in various places. However, I would also
remind the reader that, as with the Indian women's movements, there is much to be
learnt from the honest mistakes of every endeavor.

Indrani Chatterjee
Brown University

Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime. By Vijay Mishra. SUNY Series on
the Sublime. Edited by Rob Wilson. Albany: State University of New York
Press, 1998. xiii, 268 pp. $65.50 (cloth); $21.95 (paper).

This is an ambitious, thoughtful, intellectually omnivorous book. Vijay Mishra's
study argues for the presence of the "aesthetic order" of the "sublime"—as defined by
Kant, and extended by Hegel—in a myriad of Indian (mostly Hindu) devotional texts
from various historical periods, languages, and regional traditions. Mishra reads
through a mind-numbing cross-cultural collection of philosophers, literary critics,
and poets, east and west, to argue the "sublime" in India, from the Bhagavad Gītā
and Gītagovinda, to Dr. Johnson, Stanley Fish, and Kabīr. He might have done better
to limit the scope of the book, for themes multiply and sometimes crowd each other
out: there is rasa theory; reader-response; Schopenhauer and Islamic mathnavī;
Orientalism, Sāṃkhya, and G. N. Devy's postcolonial critiques of Indian literature.
It would be impossible in the short span of this review to treat all the issues and side
issues dealt with in this study, so I will concentrate on only a few.

The central thesis of the book—that devotional literatures in India, whether
Hindu or Muslim, have something to contribute to western philosophical and literary
theories of the sublime—is compelling and important. In western theory the sublime
operates by way of negation, transcending the aesthetics of the "beautiful," and is, in
Mishra's phrase, "an outrage to the imagination" (p. 200). Mishra wants to show, on
the contrary, "complex ways in which the Indian devotional texts [...] reflect the
larger problematic of self and God within an aesthetics of the sublime" (p. 41, italics
mine). And indeed, he does succeed, for the most part, in doing just this, though
along the way I take issue with various claims he makes about the essential attributes
of the "Indian sublime."

First, Mishra has a tendency throughout to totalize, not only Indian tradition (as
he freely admits, he does "collapse Indian thought with Hinduism," p. ix), but the
sublime object of devotion itself as "Brahman"—the neuter, transcendental ground
of being—a term preserved in the Upaniṣads and in northern nirganda bhakti
traditions. "The sublime," Mishra argues, "finds its highest form in the concept of
Brahman" (p. 14), which he views as undergirding all Indian "devotional poetics" (cf.
also 17, 37). This hardly does justice to the many unstable vocabularies of "sublime
otherness" (p. 197) which Mishra himself reads so perceptively. It is particularly

This valuable, well-researched, and well-argued study of the managing agency houses of Calcutta over more than a century of their existence has been given a broader title than seems justifiable. However, the clear focus on these British-run managing agency firms brings large dividends that an even wider focus on the entire spectrum of business activity might have lost.

This is certainly the best study of which I am aware of these business houses from their rise to their demise a few decades after Indian independence. Maria Misra has searched for their records and patiently explained what can be learned from them as well as what cannot be gleaned from them. She has presented what she has learned about their business practices, crucial decisions which frequently harmed them, recruitment procedures, relationships to government as well as to Indian business firms, and placed all of these activities in the context of the Raj. She writes clearly and whatever animus she has to their racism is muted in this dispassionate and convincing account.

The author concentrates on the sixty or so managing agency houses, mostly based in Calcutta with home quarters in London, which dominated the Indian industrial and commercial economy of India from the later nineteenth century to the interwar period. These included, for example, Jardine Skinner; Andrew Yule and Co.; Mackinnon, Mackenzie and Co.; Bird and Co.; Shaw Wallace and Co.; and Burn and Co. As she notes, “By 1880 these firms had secured control over a wide range of financial and commercial interests and were also industrial pioneers. . . . [In 1915