
Book Review: *In Praise of Kings*

Aparna Kapadia. *In Praise of Kings: Rajputs, Sultans and Poets in Fifteenth-century Gujarat*. Cambridge, New York, Port Melbourne, New Delhi, and Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Hardback. 183 + *x* pages.

How does one exactly praise a king? Aparna Kapadia, Assistant Professor of History at Williams College, reminds us in her book that a satisfactory answer to this question requires a critical examination of who composed the praise, and to what end. As Kapadia points out, the Mughal emperors are typically thought to have been the first to integrate Sanskrit, Persian, and Indic vernacular poetic conventions to enhance their prestige among their diverse communities of subjects. However, the wealth of scholarship on Mughal courtly patronage often obscures the fact that these developments had already begun to take place in previous centuries, especially in Gujarati literature composed during what she calls a “century of transitions” between 1398 and 1511 C.E. (3). Her rigorous examination of primary source materials and royal chronicles, together with her astute analyses of Mughal, colonial, and contemporary-era histories of this period, allow for a vivid understanding of a compelling world in which Rajput chieftains and Muzaffarid sultans—an independent dynasty of Gujarati sultans that reigned between the rule of the Delhi sultanate and Mughal empire—vied for power and control in the region. Her study of the fluid religious identities of Hindus, Muslims, and Jains in this period are furthermore an explicit challenge to contemporary nationalist narratives that praise the pre-Islamic glories of the “Land of Gurjara” (Sanskrit: *gurjaradeśa*, an earlier name for the Gujarati region) under the succession of Chaulukya-Vaghela rulers, while all but ignoring—or worse, dismissing—the complex vibrancy of the transformations that took place in the fifteenth century.

The book itself is primarily divided into an introduction, five chapters, and a brief conclusion. These are supplemented by a few helpful maps, acknowledgments, a note on transliteration, a bibliography, and an index. The introduction opens with an intriguing paradox that sets the stage for the book, namely how, if this historical period was really one of decline, the poet Gangadhara, hailing from the Vijayanagar Empire in the south of the subcontinent, could obtain so much wealth and fame at the courts of Rajput chieftains and Muzaffarid sultans alike. The introduction goes on to describe the socio-historical context just prior to and during the fifteenth century, with special emphasis on the identity-formation of warrior (*ksatriya*) castes into Rajput chieftains during the reign of the first Muzaffarid sultan, the governor Zafar Khan, who took the name Muzaffar

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Shah when proclaiming independence from the Delhi Sultanate. The introduction also emphasizes how a trend towards vernacularization away from Sanskrit nevertheless did not eliminate it as a “classical language of power” that was associated with “political prestige” (16). This remains an important point throughout Kapadia’s book which could be usefully compared with the assertions made by Sheldon Pollock in his article “Death of Sanskrit.”¹ Kapadia also here introduces the role of the colonial administrator Alexander Forbes in integrating oral, “bardic” histories of this period as recounted by members of Bhat and Charan communities.

As for the main substance of the book, Chapter One, “Setting the Stage,” is an invaluable “historical map” that traces the succession of the Chaulukya-Vaghelas, Delhi sultanate, and the settling of the Rajput chieftains just prior to the establishment of the Muzaffarid sultanate. Chapters Two through Five each focus on one or two of what Apadia calls “individual narratives” (18). Chapter Two addresses the Dimgal and Sanskrit-prefaced work *Raṅmalla-chanda*, a “battle narrative” that glorifies the chieftain Ranmal’s resistance to a new governor sent by the Delhi sultan. Chapter Three shifts to a consideration of courtly patronization of Sanskrit poetry with analyses of two of the aforementioned poet Gangadhara’s works, *Gaṅgadāsapratāpavilāsanāṭaka* (“The Play on the Glory of Gangadas”) and the *Māṅḍalikanyāpacarita* (“Biography of King Manadlik”). Chapter Four shifts to a treatment of the *Rājavinoda* (“Pleasure of the King”), a Sanskrit poem composed in a *mahākāvya* or “court epic” style that glorifies the Muslim sultan Mahmud Begada not according to pious Islamic terms but according to the *kṣatriya* convention of attaching the ruler to a “solar dynasty” (*sūryavaṃśa*). Finally, Chapter Five returns to the work of Alexander Forbes, specifically his *Rās Mālā: or the Hindoo Annals of the Province of Goozerat in Western India* (1856), which Apadia incorporates into this study given its groundbreaking history of the Rajput chieftains during this period as collected by Forbes, his chief assistant Dalpatram, and others.

The principle strength of this book rests on its cohesive integration of the wide range of sources outlined above. Apadia skillfully reconciles primary source material with radically disparate conventions and particularities according to a given work’s Hindu or Islamic provenance—a binary that she very convincingly blurs throughout the course of her book. Furthermore, her attention to consulting not only Gujarati, Dimgal, Sanskrit, and Persian but also colonial English-language sources demonstrates her commitment to producing as complete a history as possible of this all-too-neglected time period. She also demonstrates remarkable erudition in highlighting scholarly debates on the handling and integration of colonial-era histories and literature, including her persuasion that the colonized were not mere passive recipients of new “forms of knowledge,” but rather also helped to co-create these forms of knowledge through their collaborations with colonial administrators (132-133). Despite these strengths, some of the material at times came off as repetitive; for example, Forbes is given separate treatment in the introduction and again in Chapter Five. Such minor repetition is, however, isolated and does not significantly detract from

1. Sheldon Pollock, “The Death of Sanskrit,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43.2 (April 2001): 392-426.

the book. It may have also been intended to gradually introduce the reader to social observations about the material first before subjecting it to full historical analysis and contextualization.

All in all, Kapadia deserves much praise for this important and accessible book that is undoubtedly an invaluable scholarly contribution to the study of this fascinating period of Gujarat's history, the characterization of which remains full of social consequence even though the royal poets have long been silent.

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