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

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Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime by Vijay Mishra; Rob Wilson

Review by: Steven P. Hopkins

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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 Upanihads and in northern *nirguṇa* 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

jarring when Mishra identifies “Brahman” as the (unspoken?) object of desire in a Kabīr poem where “god” is described in a nuanced vocabulary of intimacy quite foreign to “Brahman”: *Hari* (“lord”), *bālama*, and *kāminī*—highly charged words meaning “beloved” (p. 192). Ultimately, Mishra reads “sublime devotion” through the lenses of Śāṅkara Vedānta and a specific strand of Hindu *nirguṇa* bhakti (devotion to a god “without attributes”). In this he closely follows his Kabīr editors, Parasnath Tiwari, S. Shukla, and R. Chaturvedi, though he notes their bias (pp. 141–42; 227). Yet, for an author who argues so persuasively for “hybridity” and against “hegemonic discourse,” such a normative account strikes one as odd indeed.

The final two chapters (4 and 5) argue the sublime through a detailed, insightful reading of north Indian Sufism, the Nāth Yogīs, tantric Siddhas, and *nirguṇī* *sants* like Nāmdev and Kabīr, pages which repay close reading, and come closest to the fiery borders of the sublime. The final chapter on Kabīr is the best in the book, and could have easily formed the core of Mishra’s study. There Mishra argues for the Indian sublime in the experience of *viraha*—painful “love-in-separation”—most powerfully embodied in the figure of Kabīr’s “burning bride,” the *virahinī* as *satī*, the bride who burns (literally) for love of her absent husband. For Mishra, this “form of the negative sublime as divine pleasure implies the sacrifice of the self in a paradoxical death-in-life” (p. 197). Far from the cosmic confidence of unity with Brahman, here lies the true figure of the Indian devotional sublime.

STEVEN P. HOPKINS  
*Swarthmore College*

*Business, Race, and Politics in British India, c. 1850–1960.* By MARIA MISRA.  
Oxford Historical Monographs. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999. xiv, 250 pp.  
\$72.00 (cloth).

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. . . . [I]n 1915