

**Ulrich Schneider:** *Der Holzgott und die Brahmanen. Teil I: Interpretation eines bislang nicht bekannten Purusottama-Mahatmya. Teil II: Textausgabe (in Lateinschrift).* (Freiburger Beiträge zur Indologie, 16). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1984. 172, 112 pp., DM 140,—

The word *māhātmya* means greatness, dignity, majesty, power, specifically the greatness or peculiar virtue of any divinity, place of worship or sacred book. A *Māhātmya*, therefore, is a text in eulogy of the merits of any such object of Hindu worship. Unsatisfying and deficient as literary compositions (a "littérature dégoûtante", as Schneider prefers to describe it in French), many *Māhātmyas* are invaluable sources for religious, social and at times even political history – at least for those who know and can bear to read these texts.

Schneider's study is devoted to a *Māhātmya* in praise of Jagannātha, or Juggernaut, as the colonial spelling goes, Lord of the Universe, a form of God Viṣṇu that is worshipped in Puri, Orissa, which in the course of time became one of the most important places of pilgrimage all over India. The text, carefully edited in part II, is written in easy Sanskrit verse typical of the unsophisticated and stereotyped style prevailing in most of the devotional and mythological literature of medieval Hinduism. However, partly due to its technical vocabulary and partly due to the rather confused way of presenting its contents, most passages of the *Māhātmya* prove to be extremely tough and tedious reading. The use of some idiom peculiar to modern Indo-Aryan speech betrays the late date of composition corroborated by external evidence (Schneider: between 1500 and 1568).

The meticulous analysis in part I is based on a detailed table of contents, preceded by a short bird's eye view of the text. This rather cumbersome procedure could perhaps have been avoided by giving a running translation of the *Māhātmya* that would have been of great help also for those who don't read Sanskrit (the "interested public" too often neglected especially by German scholars).

It is not possible to give here any idea of all the redactional layers Schneider tries to make out in the text. His argument at times may not be fully convincing, but the general traits of his analysis seem to be in harmony with the history of the cult of Jagannātha as known from other sources (Schneider here is indebted to the Orissa Research Project (1971-1976), especially to R. Geib's study "Die Indradyumna-Legende. Beitrag zur Geschichte des Jagannātha-Kultes", Wiesbaden 1975). The *Māhātmya* reflects the Brahmanical reaction to a cult of non-Brahmanical, probably of tribal origin indicated by the god's rather primitive wooden image. This cult, supported by royal power and ignoring caste differences, proved to be a serious challenge to Brahmanical exclusiveness as is clearly evident from verses like:

As soon as he catches a glimpse of the Lord of the Blue Mountain (i. e.

Jagannātha), even an untouchable (candāla) will be released from the cycle of rebirth;

Whereas someone possessing perfect knowledge of Vedānta philosophy, as long as he hasn't seen the wooden idol on Blue Mountain, will restlessly wander through this circle of birth and death so hard to overcome.

(Chapter VIII, 157/158)

This apparently egalitarian attitude is countered by an attempt to reestablish or perhaps rather to reinforce Brahmanical exclusiveness. Devotion (*bhakti*), the main element in the cult of the wooden God, is matched by knowledge (preeminently Vedānta) and ritual (Tantrism), both tendencies stressing the importance of the priestly class.

Schneider's at times sarcastic style (a good example is the passage on Māhātmyas in general on p. 8/9) leaves no doubt as to his attitude towards the whole cult of the wooden Lord of the Universe which to him hardly seems to be more than an extraordinary case of pious fraud. However, I can't follow his generalizing remarks on devotion (*bhakti*) that seem to me to neglect the rather complex nature of this religious phenomenon. Simple-hearted devotion may indeed be misused by the ruling class or classes, but one cannot overlook the fact that *bhakti* at the same time proved to be the vehicle for the claim of individuality against a repressive society as in the case of great devotees (*bhakta*) like Lāl Ded, Mīrā Bāī and Kabīr. Especially Kabīr who probably lived some decades before the final redaction of our Māhātmya has become an attraction for many contemporary Indian intellectuals. For the man who confessed to be just God's dog, devotion (*bhakti*) was the way to individuality and freedom – freedom not in the restricted religious sense, but as a provoking, at times even shocking challenge to all that was and is orthodox in Indian tradition.

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**Konrad Meissner:** Mālushāhī and Rājulā. A ballad from Kumāūn (India) as sung by Gopī Dās. Part I: Kumāūnī text, translation and appendices; Part II: Commentary; Part III: Glossary; 1 sound cassette. (Neuindische Studien, 10). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1985. 341, 221, 260 pp., 1 map, 16 plates. DM 124,-

Ours is an age of waning traditions, some of them coming to an abrupt and often violent end, some just slowly dying away. The impact of modern civilisation is felt in even the remotest parts of the world, and one feature typical of traditional society that hardly has any chance to survive is what has been labeled oral poetry since the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord. The "Singer of Tales" seems to be a figure