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Review of *Reciting the Goddess: Narratives of Place  
and the Making of Hinduism in Nepal* by Jessica  
Vantine Birkenholtz.

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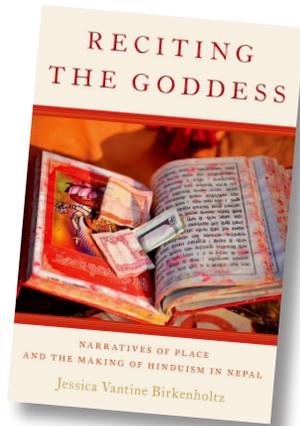
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Review of *Reciting the Goddess: Narratives of Place and the Making of Hinduism in Nepal* by Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz.

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The reviewer would like to thank the participants of the 2018 University of Toronto's "Recent Readings in Nepalese Religion" reading group— Pushpa Acharya, Alexander O'Neill, Amber Moore, Jesse Pruitt, Srilata Raman, Austin Simoes-Gomes, Ian Turner, and Andrea Wollein—from whose insights and comments this review has greatly benefitted.



***Reciting the Goddess: Narratives of Place and the Making of Hinduism in Nepal.***

**Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz.**  
New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Xvi & 321 pages. ISBN 9780199341160.

**Reviewed by Christoph Emmrich**

Whoever has had the chance to wander past the Bhotahiti bookshops in the early weeks and months of the year, cannot but have noticed the towering stacks of hot-off-the-press flashy sindhur-red and plastic-bound *Svsthānīvratakathā* volumes leaning against each other on the concrete steps leading up to the counters, announcing the season in which the tales of Gomayaju, Satī, and Śiva Mahādeva are read in households across the Kathmandu Valley, and in which women and men flock to Sankhu for more public displays of endurance and devotion dedicated to the goddess. Since last year, academic readers who may have always wanted to know more about this annual publishing and ritual occurrence are finally able to refer to Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz’s masterly monograph on the history, lives, and times of the text that stand behind it.

*Reciting the Goddess* represents the first book-length study of one of the most important texts of Newar

Hinduism and of Nepalese religion in general. The book’s most outstanding and arguably enduring contribution is that Birkenholtz writes the literary history of the text, or rather of the *Svsthānīvratakathā* (SVK) corpus, from its incipience, documented by the earliest manuscript dating to 1573, through its development across centuries, languages, and redactions, right up to the versions in use today. Such an enterprise is still outstanding for comparable literary corpora such as the *Svayambhūpurāṇa* or *Paśupatiṇṇa*. The book’s further merit is that it considers versions in all three major languages of Kathmandu Valley literature in which the multilingual corpus of the *Svsthānīvratakathā* was composed—Newar, Nepali, and Sanskrit—and explores the role these linguistic communities played in negotiating its present shape and practice. It is the first monograph that looks at a particular Nepalese textual transmission from the perspective of its translation between literary idioms, between ethnic and caste communities, and across historical periods in which these languages conferred varying degrees of outreach and prestige. *Reciting the Goddess* encourages scholars and students alike to rethink the role given to Nepal in the study of Hinduism, advising us neither to elevate Nepal to the most paradigmatic instantiation of Indian Hinduism, nor to reduce it to a picturesque but distant tributary to the Gangetic mainstream. Birkenholtz convinces her readers that what happens in Nepal can throw new light on the history of religion in specific parts of the rest of the subcontinent to counter the fallacious equation of Hinduism with an India that is either poorly defined, hegemonic, or both.

The book opens by formulating these larger implications for “Hinduisms and Histories in Nepal” (Chapter

One), but not before introducing the reader to the ritual performances that the text celebrates and demands, and at the center of which the text is placed through its reading and through the votive rites (*vrata*) dedicated to the goddess Svsthānī. As the book’s secondary title indicates, it is “place” as a critical term, even more than narrative, which drives the project’s interests and aspirations. The question of place is articulated through the opposition of the “local” and the “translocal.” In terms of “traditions, practices, ideologies, people, and geography,” the local is defined as female, small, specific, private/familial, customary, Newar, and “most immediately associated with the SVK tradition” (p. 20). It is contrasted with the translocal as male, public/civic, fixed, transcending specificity, non-Newar, i.e. either Nepali, or, more generally, “cultivated in the Gangetic plains,” (p. 75) or even pan-Indic. This latter is further identified as authoritative due to its association with normative Brahmanical Hindu ideology as represented by the Sanskrit Purāṇas (p. 21). Regarding South Asian society, Birkenholtz points out that the place she is dealing with, both in terms of texts and voices, is a high-caste environment, but also stresses that the difference between local and translocal may also be caste-specific; such as when she contrasts “Nepali high-caste Hindu culture and local Newar Hinduism” (p. 29) and in noting that some of the historical changes on the lower high-caste Newar side may be part of the project of “keeping up with the Joshis” (pp. 202, 131). It is also clear that for the author the most salient difference between the local and the translocal is that of gender. Though Birkenholtz does see instances of an historical expansion of the local in the history of the Kathmandu Valley (p. 21), the irreducibility of

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the difference between local and translocal and its resulting tensions remain instrumental to the book's formulation of historical change. The main purpose of keeping the local and the translocal in categorical opposition is ultimately to help identify "the historically local female orientation of the *Svsthānī Kathā* as a *vrat kathā* and its gradual transformation into a translocal male-oriented tradition as an authoritative Purāna texts" (p. 203).

The book proceeds in its narrative following three distinct historical movements: the changes to the deity's visual representation, the growth of the textual corpus, and the shifts in the articulation of the tradition's ideology. In the second chapter, "Goddess of Place, Place of the Goddess," Birkenholtz outlines the changes that occur from the sixteenth-century aniconic embodiment of *Svsthānī* in the first manuscripts of the text itself, to her seventeenth-century apparition in sculpture in association with Śiva Mahādeva, via her nineteenth-century localization within a *yantra* encircled by the *Aṣṭamāṭṛkās*, and, finally, her materializing in the early twenty-first century in the form of a stand-alone image housed in a newly erected Sankhu temple.

Chapter Three, "An Unexpected Archive," helps document the process of Purāṇization the *Svsthānī* corpus has undergone since the sixteenth century (pp.

103-108), which consisted of the early Sanskrit-Newar core dealing with the heroine Gomayaju and the miraculous effects of the vow. The mid-eighteenth century then sees the incorporation of Purāṇic material in the form of the narratives around Śiva-Mahādeva's marriage to Satī, followed by the inclusion of the Vaiṣṇava narrative featuring the Veda-stealing demons Madhu and Kaiṭabha in the late eighteenth century, all still told in Newar. It is the first Nepali versions, possibly dating back to the seventeenth century, but with evidence only from the early nineteenth century, that include the narratives surrounding Śiva-Mahādeva's encounters with the ṛṣis' wives and his victory over the demon Jālandhara through the seduction of his wife Vṛndā. Newar versions, which in the nineteenth century instead expand the Gomayaju story, catch up with the Nepali accretions only in twentieth century (p. 176). It is as late as the twentieth century that the current thirty-one-fold chapterization of the text is established and that its ritualization is extended from two nights and two days to a month-long series of events. We see across the centuries the establishment of an expansive separate Nepalese tradition (pp. 110-115) that is both Newar and Nepali.

"The Making of Modern Hinduism in Nepal" is then traced, in Chapter Four, along the trajectories of the redactional moves identified in the preceding chapter. This happens in

a first step by "weaving the *Svsthānī Kathā* into Purāṇic narratives and vice versa" (p. 137). This is followed by a second stage which, through a movement "from the human realm to include the world of gods as an extension of the ritual vow," leads to "establishing a larger narrative that lays out universal conceptions of the Brahmanical Purāṇic worldview and effectively ties the *Svsthānī Kathā* into different Hindu devotional paths" (ibid.) This then culminates in a third step with "increasing emphasis placed on traditional roles and notions of the feminine" (ibid.). In short, we see the creation of "A Women's Tradition," the title of Chapter Five, that unfolds in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Birkenholtz sees "a reemphasis on the historically conservative ideal of Hindu womanhood" (p. 176) as the main feature of the latest turn in the life of the text. She explains this as a Nepalese reaction to modernizing trends emerging among colonial Indian women under the conditions of a reinvented Indian patriarchy (pp. 158-160). Ultimately, this points to the twentieth century fashioning of Nepal as the "last Hindu kingdom," described by historians and sociologists of Nepal. The close readings of the female figures of the text, including the main heroine Gomayaju, her daughter-in-law Candrāvātī, and Satī that Birkenholtz provides are some of the most insightful passages of the book.

Equally insightful are the voices of contemporary women that “reveal the deeply divided opinions about whether the *Svasthānī Kathā* is a source either of empowerment or indoctrination of women” (p. 201).

The text seen as medium, archive, and tool identifies the author’s main interest in it as functional for understanding matters that lie outside of it, not so much in the text or in the goddess herself whose embodiment is the text. Thus, what must remain outside the scope of this book is the ritual power the text receives through the attribution of a divine status, and in the identification of text and divinity in which authors, redactors, and devotees relinquish their agency to the divine text - an exploration that may throw a different light both on the constitution of the text and the interfaces of theological content and liturgical practice. Even a successful functionalist reading of the text, however, may require a discussion of how far tools are more than just neutral objects that enhance our vision, but rather force decisions upon their users and organize interventions. Further, if the text’s ultimate function is to reveal what is outside of itself, its usefulness has to be measured by how much it tells us about Nepalese history that we do not already know. The fact that, on the contrary, it seems to powerfully confirm what sociologists and historians have already told us, while revealing about itself what they have not, seems to indicate that the *Svasthānīvratakathā* is much more than a tool, but a world in its own right shaped by authors, redactors, devotees, textual transmission, and sexual difference. It is this that Birkenholtz’s work has so brilliantly shown, and what makes *Reciting the Goddess* a model for future scholarship on Nepalese religion and literature.

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