

Hindu kingdoms, to the Mughals

Sandhya Sharma's pioneering volume investigates Mughal Indian society and politics, as well as family dynamics, kinship, and caste, through *Riti Kal* literature. The author focuses on a form of *Riti Kal* known as *Braja basha* poetry, which was predominant in Western and North-Central India from the sixteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Interestingly, although this poetry was traditionally written by male poet-saints, those originating from Northern India are mostly penned from a female point of view.

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AS A RESULT, *Riti Kal* as a genre advocated the conventional roles of women in family and society, and did so with sympathy and understanding. In addition, the majority of *Braja basha* poetry is mystical in nature, focusing on the spiritual union between a devotee and God. One of the most popular themes was the legend of *Krishna* (an avatar of the Hindu god *Vishnu*) and his chief consort *Radha*. Through a chronological and historical framework, Sharma traces the development of the female role and the evolution of the *Krishna-Radha* narrative against contemporaneous socio-political and religious environments respectively. As a result, she has found through her extensive research that the literature is a reflection of the changes in North India, from being home to medieval Hindu kingdoms, to being controlled by the Mughals. The author's use of this traditional form of Hindu literature offers an innovative and fresh perspective of understanding the influence of the Mughal Empire on North Indian life and culture.

The Introduction, which also acts as the first chapter, provides a sound foundation of understanding the genre of *Riti Kal* literature. It is made very clear, from Sharma's concise overview, that *Riti Kal* is greatly diverse and complex, qualities that have prevented it from being used as a source for understanding Mughal impact on North India. In addition, this section of the book acquaints the reader with the wide variety of primary source material on the subject, and how it can be utilized as historical documentation. Chapter Two, *Kinship, Caste, and Gender*, investigates the relationship between the individual and society. Sharma addresses how the dynamics of the family emanates in larger kin groups and plays a role in the formation of caste. She is particularly interested in patriarchal joint families, how they affected societal development, and how they were affected by the changes brought on by the Mughals. In her discussion of familial ideologies and their position within society, she takes the opportunity to discuss the individual, and how conformist and nonconformist attitudes are indicators of continuity and change. At this point in the chapter, she shifts her attention to gender relations. What makes this discussion more insightful and especially profound is that Sharma looks at the issues of gender from a historical perspective and not



Above: Shah Jahangir. Attributed to Abu al-Hasan (1589-1630) (Bonhams), Public domain. Wikimedia Commons.

according to our present day views. She also brings up an interesting point in her study; that the idealization of women in *Riti Kal* literature actually resulted in the oppression and objectification of women in society. Her examination concludes with a look at how different poets viewed women and gender relations through sociological, political, and familial frameworks, and how that affected their writings.

Chapter Three, *Krishna and Radha*, recounts the attributes, incidents, and myths attached to the legends of the two figures over time. Sharma re-evaluates the emotional and devotional portrayal of *Krishna and Radha* that were first set forth by nineteenth century scholars and historians. She looks at different traditions of the duo, as well as their divine and human forms, through a comparison between Indian religious traditions and colonial perceptions. The author brilliantly continues her assessment of gender relations by looking at the treatment of *Krishna and Radha* in devotional poetry and how their roles changed and developed over time. As a result, she demonstrates that *Radha* takes precedence in power over the god *Krishna*, which an interesting juxtaposition to the contemporary views of women and religious practices.

Three works are acutely examined in Chapter Four, *Narratives from the Past: Shakuntala, Prabodh Chandrodaya Natak, and Sujan Vilas*. Sharma uses these texts to support her argument that either *Riti Kal* poets, their patrons, or their audience (or perhaps all of the above), were making attempts to revive their literary and traditional past. Her comparison of these eighteenth century texts with their ancient counterparts allows for her to successfully demonstrate the impact of socio-political changes, brought on by the Mughals and later by colonialism, on pre-modern India.

Chapter Five, *Rulers, Regions, and Wars: Histories in Verse*, is an analysis of political narratives of the pre-modern period. By looking at political works contemporaneous to the poetry that Sharma has dedicated this book to, she allows the reader to gain a greater understanding of how much influence the changing environment had on *Riti Kal* literature. In addition, this section allows for a more comprehensive view of the relationship between the Mughal court at the different regions of Northern India. Through this chapter, Sharma successfully shows how the poetry reveals shifting patterns of alliances and rivalries between different geographical regions and the Mughal Empire, particularly between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Sharma's conclusion is an overview of the book. Her brief summary reiterates the necessity of her examination, and how important this traditional type of Indian literature is to understanding the dynamics between the Mughal Empire and the indigenous society, politics, and culture of the subcontinent. Sharma has paved the way for future research and scholarship in using literature as a platform for understanding the dynamic environment of pre-modern India. Her fresh and new perspective only helps achieve a greater understanding of the extent of the Mughals' influence on traditional practices, and also proves that this type of material should not be treated so flippantly. This book, filled with wonderful color plates, is a necessity to scholars, students, and those interested in learning more about pre-modern India.

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respect, the seventeen chapters included in Fredholm's collection provide what is probably one of the most detailed accounts to date of the SCO as an organisation for the regional security governance of Central Asia.

Contextualizing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The meticulous study of the SCO provided by the volume edited by Fredholm ensures that the contributions make available a comprehensive overview of the institutional history and practices of the organisation. Usually, commentators take as their point of reference the 2005 rejection of the US application for a SCO observer status, and therefore label the organisation as an 'Asian NATO', an 'OPEC with nuclear bombs', or a 'club for dictators'. In contrast to such disparaging assessments, the accounts provided in Fredholm's volume depict the SCO as a mechanism for complex interaction on a wide range of economic, energy, security, and socio-cultural issues. This point of departure assist in unveiling the contextual dynamics and processes that both spur and sustain the SCO mechanism.

The book offers a detailed account of the organisational structure of the SCO. The vivid account depicts not only the aims and intentions of the organisation, but also illustrates the interplay between its permanent and non-permanent institutional arrangements. The picture that emerges is of an elaborate interaction between frameworks for informal discussion and regularised institutional processes. Thus, by demonstrating the complexity and diversity of institutions, initiatives, and interactions, the volume edited by Fredholm

makes conspicuous that the SCO is much more than a geopolitical tool for either Moscow or Beijing. In fact, the book makes clear that the reading of the SCO as a type of anti-Western Sino-Russian alliance misunderstands both the content and character of the bilateral relationship between Beijing and Moscow, as well as the broader dynamics of Central Asian international affairs.

In fact, it is very often the perceptions of the Central Asian republics that tend to get excluded (and occluded) in the analysis of the SCO. Fredholm's collection distinguishes itself by devoting an entire section on the motivations and rationale of the individual member states of the organisation. Such a parallel assessment has definitely been missing in the literature and offers a much-needed insight into the involvement and input of the Central Asian republics in the agenda of the SCO. What is particularly worthwhile about the contributions to the volume edited by Fredholm is its indication that despite the conspicuous divergences between the motivations of the SCO member states, the organisation nevertheless manages not only to identify areas of common interest, but also to build consensus and to construct agreement around shared aims and initiatives. The volume is quite explicit that this observation should not be read as an indication for the emergence of a regional integration similar to either that of the European Union (EU) or that of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). On the contrary, the contributors to Fredholm's collection are quite clear that the SCO is a state-centric, top-down project driven by the regimes of the member states and is quite distinct from the regionalizing frameworks

... the SCO not only survives, but also has become the most prominent institutional framework in Eurasia – an area notorious for its aversion to any form of meaningful regional initiatives.

embedded in both the EU and NATO. However, and crucially, the SCO indicates the emergence of cooperation in a region and between countries where such patterns of interactions are both rare and unusual.

Conclusion

Promoted as an organization for Central Asian cooperation that seeks to maintain regional stability and advance economic relations, the SCO not only reiterates Beijing's increasing clout in international life, but also boosts its credentials by emphasizing the peaceful foreign policy intentions and commitment to regional security. Its ability to foster discussions and agreements between its members is already an important achievement. And this is at least one reason why the SCO is significant and should be taken seriously. In this respect, the accounts provided in the volume edited by Fredholm challenges many of the dominant interpretations of the SCO. At the same time, the contributions offer a veritable picture of SCO's dynamics. The book's contextual assessment of the organisation's design and practices offers useful counterpoint to the prevailing narratives that will be welcomed both by those following Central Asian affairs and by those interested in the patterns of new regionalism, especially in Asia. At the same time, it is expected that the volume edited by Fredholm would benefit both students and scholars of post-Soviet politics, Security Studies, and international relations.

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