

Desire, Spirituality and “Regimes of Truth” in South Asian Literature: An Introduction

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This Special Issue on “Desire, Spirituality and ‘Regimes of Truth’ in South Asian Literature” examines the nature of power and its manifestations in various discourses on desire and spirituality in contemporary South Asian literature. According to Michel Foucault, power is the “network of relations” in which entities confront each other. There is no “essence” to power, but only its specific relational forms. In this sense, power is both invisible and functional, and to analyze power relations, we cannot be satisfied with the analysis of actors who use power as an instrument of coercion, or even an analysis of the structures within which those actors operate. Rather, we must recognize that these diffuse power relations are in discourses, or what Foucault once called “regimes of truth.”

The essays in this issue ground the discussion of desire and spirituality in the broader contexts of gender, colonialism, nationalism and the nation-state that shape South Asian society in the Foucauldian project of relating discourses to power. Such a discussion allows one to see how the practices of desire and spirituality, which seem very personal and aesthetics phenomena, are shaped by “the regimes of truth” or the power relations in which we find ourselves.

One of the important dimensions of the regimes of truth is their capacity to make their invisible presence in the everyday practices of people. The contributors of this collection have tried to analyze that invisible presence of power in the South Asian texts and society as the same attempt led Foucault to the analysis of discourses of his society, not to create a new discourse on power or whatsoever but to analyze how power operates through the everyday discourses such as desire and spirituality. The contributors were fascinated by the way regimes of truth embedded themselves in most private spheres of life such as the way human beings self-organize themselves into communities or their acts of self-affectively relating to each other when defining who they are.

Let us see how the essays in this collection analyze the “invisible and functional”

power relations in discourses on desire and spirituality in the contexts of South Asia literature and society.

Vasu Renganathan's "Being Kṛṣṇā's Gōpi: Songs of Anṭāl, Ritual Practices and the Power Relations between God and Devotee in the Contemporary Tamil Nadu" explores the power relations among the poet-saints, devotees and divinities *bhakti* texts such as songs of patronship, singing of victories, praising of kings' caliber and so on. The essay shows the transformation of a diverse form of power relations during the medieval and modern periods demonstrating the paradigm of what Foucault claims that power cannot be understood only as a juridical edifice of sovereignty but disperse in discourses, besides others, of desire and spirituality.

Chandrima Chakraborty's "Speaking through Bodies, Exhibiting the Limits: British Colonialism and Gandhian Nationalism" shows Gandhi's initial self-reproach and his later transformation of the figure of the Hindu ascetic and ascetic practices to contest and alter Western "regimes of truth" about Hindu religion and masculinity. Chakraborty says Gandhi uses nationalist asceticism as a "technology of the self" to decolonize certain types of bodies, behaviors, and desires colonialism had constructed in and through the self-disciplinary practices of the colonized Indian male subject. At the same time, she shows how decolonized discourses and practices of the Gandhism also functions to dominate marginalized castes, classes, religions and genders. This fact interestingly leads us to the observation of how the coercive power of power is capable to resurface even in the discourses that resist it. The observation reinforces Foucault's idea that power is very subtle, pervasive and makes its unacknowledged presence everywhere.

Anna Guttam's "Loving India: Same-Sex Desire, Hinduism and the Nation-State in Abha Dawesar's *Babyji*" explores the hidden presence of power relation in the representation of same-sex love in Abha Dawesar's *Babyji*. Networks of relations that simultaneously challenge and reinforce the regimes of truth intrinsic to Hinduism, class hierarchies, caste divisions and, indeed, the Indian nation-state."

Nida Sajid's "Unruly Voices/Disciplined Bodies: Games of Truth and Desire in Kishwar Naheed's Poetry" observes how aesthetic self emerges out of a pleasure-oriented "*ars erotica*" and transforms itself into an ethical voice that counters against the discourses of patriarchy and the nation-state in Naheed's poems. In a Foucauldian spirit, she tries to show that queer desire is not just an external or independent phenomenon but always finds its expression in the historical discourses of gender and colonialism. Sajid's main point in the essay is there is no homoeroticism that can be told or remembered without simultaneously telling the story of sexuality and colonialism.