
For someone with an academic interest in women’s writings from South Asia, Lidia Sudyka’s book, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Royal Ladies of Kerala*, is a rare treat. Dedicated to the Keralite noble women composing Sanskrit poetry in the period between the 18th and the 20th centuries, it takes us into an underexplored area of research on women’s literary production in India. The groundbreaking nature of the enquiry, conceived as an introductory study of an area which so far has drawn little attention, is highlighted by the author in the very manner she has formulated the subtitle (*Towards a History of Women’s Writing in Sanskrit in the 18th to 20th-century Kerala*). However, the fact spelled out by Sudyka (p. 16) right at the outset, namely the possibility of further research, is greatly narrowed down by the scarcity of extant Sanskrit compositions by women authors not only from Kerala but the Indian subcontinent in general. In fact, the compositions of the poets analyzed by Sudyka have been preserved only because of the privileged position of their authors, i.e., their royal or noble lineage (p. 17), and the emotional, familial bonds that secured the respect of the descendants towards literary heritage left by their female ancestors. The book under review is thus a salient attempt at mapping what little evidence of this particular literary territory is available at the moment, with other vast areas that may forever remain unmapped, possibly not because women had not composed in Sanskrit—or for that matter, in other regional or pan-regional Indian languages across millennia—but because the evidence of their past literary activities has been rarely preserved. As of now—that is, unless some new traces are discovered—that fragile heritage might be already lost. Even so, Sudyka (p. 178) hopes against hope that manuscripts of other women writing in Sanskrit might still be unearthed, possibly in their ancestral homes, and that such discoveries might give us an “access to the world of their imagination and life.”

Befittingly for a work on poetic compositions, the title refers to Sanskrit as “the language of the gods,” a relatively late phrase (possibly circa 7th c.) that has already turned into a dead metaphor reflecting the changed status of the language itself. Today Sanskrit is still a language greatly revered but used almost exclusively in sacral and ritual Hindu context, else by a miniscule group of speakers who return Sanskrit as their mother tongue in the Indian census. More notably, however, Sudyka subtly paraphrases the title of another book, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men. Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Premodern India* (2009), a seminal work authored by Sheldon Pollock. The word play on the title is duly acknowledged by Sudyka (p. 9) but is not a mere rhetorical device—and there is a gentle feminist twist to it, with women conspicuously absent in Pollock’s original heading. In his widely discussed work, Pollock analyses the trajectory of Sanskrit’s rise into the privileged position of a cosmopolitan vehicle of culture and power across a vast expanse of South and Southeast Asia in the period of India’s cultural dominance and its fall under the pressure of the regional—or what he refers to as the vernacular—languages of the area. Hence, Pollock focuses on the interplay of culture and power in the cosmopolitan dissemination of Sanskrit literature. Likewise, Sudyka, devising such an astute paraphrase of an earlier title, locates her investigation at the intersection of culture, power, gender, caste, history, and politics of Kerala and the colonial influence, and attempts a nuanced reading of how those factors might have impacted literary production of noble ladies of Kerala. She thus duly positions her study at the core of recent academic debates and sets out to explore the dynamic interplay of the cosmopolitan and the local, the pan-Indian and the regional, the cultural and the political.
In the first part of the introductory section titled “Background” (pp. 15–41), Sudyka probes the structure of society in Kerala with special attention to different patterns of matrilineal system and specificity of the inter-caste conjugal alliances between Nayars and the Nambudiri Brahmins. A discussion of education system follows. Here Sudyka underlines the fact that the girls of noble families were allowed home-schooling in Sanskrit, a privilege that continued even after the onset of puberty, which was largely considered a cut-off point in the home education of Brahmin girls (pp. 32–33). Interestingly, but perhaps too briefly, she mentions sporadic instances of lower castes being taught Sanskrit in Kerala, an element of struggle for social reform (p. 33, 177). However, from the end of the 19th c., prestige attached to the idea of Sanskrit scholarship came to be steadily replaced by need for modern schooling in English and Malayalam, a model that provided knowledge better suited to political and social circumstances under colonial dominance. This process of transition might be taken as the next, logical step in the transformation of culture and power structures beyond the pre-modern period analyzed by Pollock. Redeploying Pollock’s ideas, Sudyka investigates the next, natural turning point, when the position of authority that Sanskrit held in Kerala, already undermined by Malayalam, is further challenged by the growing presence of English. Pertinently to women’s changing situation, the new, often contradictory ideals of womanhood begin to be debated more and more often in the local languages employed now in a novel and easily accessible literary medium, i.e., the periodical and the novel. However, because of Sanskrit’s privileged position within the sacred and cultural sphere of Hinduism, women’s knowledge of Sanskrit remains still a marker of prestige indicating their high intellectual, but also social, standing. The concluding segment of the introductory part aims to depict daily life of a woman poet based on a hypothesis that her life, like that of other women from the privileged backgrounds, revolved around children, house chores, and meticulous performance of various rituals prescribed for each day of the week and each month of the Hindu calendar (pp. 37–39). Sudyka quotes here personal reflections of her informants, the descendants of the royal and noble families to which the women poets discussed in the later chapters of the book belonged. The short, concluding paragraph of this segment, which reviews distribution of women’s Sanskrit writings in Kerala, could have been more extensive. However, Sudyka does discuss the limited circulation of the works under study in the later sections dedicated to the women poets in focus.

The four following chapters portray women poets from different parts of Kerala corresponding to different regional state formations: Travancore (“Women’s Writing in Travancore,” pp. 43–88), the Punjar Kingdom (“Singing the Glory of the Gods. Makayiram Nal Amba Tampuratti of Punjar”, pp. 89–110), Cochin (“Three Generations of Women Literati from the Cochin Royal Lineage and Their Intellectual Environment”, pp. 111–36), and “the North of Kerala” (“To the North of Kerala. Lakshmi of the Kadatanad Royl House,” pp. 137–76), the map aiding the reader here (p. 83). All these chapters, but for the first one, are organized in a similar manner. They open with a section that discusses the history of royal lineages in the specific region; subsequently, they review, in chronological order, the often scarce material on the royal and noble women associated with the respective courts. The biographical information is in some cases interspersed with shorter or longer quotations from the relevant authors’ poetic compositions (in transcription of the original Sanskrit and Sudyka’s English translation). Each of the chapters dedicated to specific regions of different royal lineages is appended with the reproductions of photographs taken by Sudyka during her fieldwork in Kerala and offers readers a visual peek into the slowly disappearing material evidence of the past of Kerala’s royal women, hence creating their unique archive. The chapter, dis-
cussing royal and noble women poets of Travancore, includes an additional segment titled, “Introduction: Sanskrit literature and scholarship in Kerala” (pp. 43–46), which perhaps could have been placed in the introductory part of the book as most of its observations pertain to Kerala as a whole and not only the Travancore region.

Sudyka’s longstanding efforts to collect, during her fieldwork and through her informants, whatever limited information she could on the twenty women poets and their writings (cf. “we know very little about the lives of women writers and scholars,” p. 58), which she presented also in her earlier publications, are praiseworthy. Some of the women poets Sudyka mentions are, Tirunal Rukmini Bayi (b. 1809), Bharani Tirunal Lakshmi Bayi, Karttika Nal Ambadevi Tampuratti (b. 1878), Svati Tirunal Ambadevi Tirupatti (1890–1928), Makayiram Nal Amba Tampuratti (1917–2010), Iku Amma Tampuratti (1844–1921), Manku Tampuran (1884–1977), Madhavi Amma (1888–1968), Lakshmi Tampuratti (b. 1845) and others. It is in these passages of her book that Sudyka brings to the fore the intellectual and aesthetic contribution, of Kerala’s women authors, to the unique intellectual landscape of the area, a contribution that also adds new details to the larger picture of the Indian subcontinent’s intellectual history. Moreover, Sudyka includes in her study biographical information on women scholars whose writings are not physically traceable (e.g., Manorama Tampuratti of the 18th c.), but who were known for their Sanskrit scholarship and are present in oral tradition where some verses attributed to them have been preserved to this day (p. 55). Excerpts of Sanskrit verses of women authors quoted in the book come mostly from hymns dedicated to Hindu gods, a genre popular in Kerala (p. 178). Apparently, a few of the authors were more prolific in Malayalam than in Sanskrit (p. 67), and some composed also, following a long-standing local tradition, in a mixture of both these languages (see Manipravalam). This bilingual literary activity, i.e., writing in both languages and in a mixture of both, seem to be a promising direction for further research, as even a general information on the Malayalam writings of women authors in focus remains outside the orbit of Sudyka’s present work. Perhaps such studies, scarce in English, are conducted in Malayalam and if so, should be brought into a wider readership in English translation.

Having said that, Sudyka’s exploration of women’s writings during the long period of cultural transition (18th to early 20th c.)—when the strong literary presence of the regional language/s and the prestige of Sanskrit found themselves on the back foot by the entry (and growing presence) of English as the third player on the linguistic scene—brings to the fore the gendered and hence nuanced perspective on Sanskrit literature as a ‘celebration of aesthetic power’, to use Pollock’s phrase. Some of the Sanskrit compositions in focus were edited and published by local publishers in Kerala, starting from the early 1900s; some were earlier translated and published in English by Sanskrit scholars (e.g., Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat and K. Narayana Pillai). In her book, Sudyka includes her own English translations several poets, among them Lakshmi Tampuratti and Manku Tampuran, whose Sanskrit compositions in transcription are appended at the end of the book (pp. 183–97) for those who would like to pursue the texts in the original or use them in a teaching environment.

A general remark rounding off the review: the book could have benefited from some work on style and editing, and a more detailed index (pp. 223–24) that would include years. Nonetheless, to the best of my knowledge, the academic investigation conducted by Sudyka is one of the first – if not the first – in-depth studies of Keralite women composing Sanskrit poetry in the period in focus, and as such is a recommended reading that puts light on this underexplored area of literary production.

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