

Book Review

Karmic Passages: Israeli Scholarship on India

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David Shulman and Shalva Weil, eds., *Karmic Passages: Israeli Scholarship on India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008).¹

The book published by Oxford University Press in 2008 as *Karmic Passages: Israeli Scholarship on India*, confirms that Indian studies in Israel have found a solid academic presence in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Beersheba. The book also confirms the real interest in India for many Israelis.

The title, *Karmic Passages*, is interesting because it clearly announces the complexity of the attention that Israelis have for India. This complexity is perfectly illustrated in the organization of the book, which is divided into three parts whose interrelation appears, however, to be rather thin. We find three distinct parts, the first entitled "Philological and Literary Excursions," the second "Buddhist Voyages," the third "Sojourns in Contemporary India." The contributors have also each his/her own *karma* that seems to have led them along diverse paths. The lack of dialectic and synthesis between the parts is regrettable; it is also to be noted that there is no conclusion.

However this book very much underlines the high standard of Indian studies in Israel. All the aspects of Indian civilization are deeply analyzed from South to North. The book also has a political aspect as it celebrates the "fifteenth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Israel" as noted by Arun K. Singh, ambassador of India to Israel.

David Shulman, who with his book *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry* has renewed not only Sanskrit but also Tamil studies, inaugurates this book with Shalva Weil, a pioneer in research on Indian Jews with the title "The Israeli Quest for India." They immediately explain the fascination of young Israelis for India after their military service. Having met them while I was doing my research in Varanasi and Kathmandu, I would not contradict this. Israelis who choose to do Indian studies have for the most part been in India before and some practice meditation especially in the Tibetan Buddhism mode. The Dalai Lama has in this way often come to Israel, and there are Israeli residents in Dharamsala.

David Shulman begins the first part of the book and we embark on a very specific philological journey into the poetry of kings and bees in the sixteenth century, especially around Krishnadevarâya, flanked by his minister Timmarasu and his buffoon Tenâli Ram, who reigned over the Vijayanagara state, noting the great particularity of this Telugu poetry and of the work *Âmukta-mâlyada* that Shulman (p. 13) defines as "a novel-cum-encyclopedia-cum-summatheologica" and explains that in fact this poem was written "as an act of atonement" because Krishnadevarâya has not recognized the grandeur of the poet Nrsimhakavi. Then he continues with a precise study of Tukka cycle: "These are the so-called 'Tukka' poems ascribed to the king's first and most unhappy queen, who is variably called Tukka, Tukkaji, Varadarajamma and Cinnadevi" (p. 16). What is most important for David Shulman is the interpretation of this poetry in the seventeenth century that will project a new image of royalty.

Yohanan Grinshpon draws our attention to a fresh reading of the classic work, the *Hitopadesa* (6th century A.D.). The article articulates well with the book title and can be read on many levels including the political. His article begins with this question, "Can an enemy become a true friend?" The Sanskritists know that the Sanskrit word *ari* designates both friend and enemy. Yohanan Grinshpon focuses on three stories of the section, *Mitra-Labh* ("Acquisition of Friends") and offers a Gandhian reading of one of them (pp. 40-41)

"The story of the Gandhi-like crow Laghupatanaka and the mouse named Hiranyaka (Golden) expresses a metaphysics underlying an infinite scope of possible transformations including that of *svabhâva* itself [...] the Gandhian crow launches a *satyâgraha*, preparing to starve himself unto death. And he succeeds." This is what Gandhi did on numerous occasions to convince his interlocutors whom he however did not consider to be enemies. Human nature (*svabhâva*) is endowed with great violence according to Gandhi but can be transformed through rigorous attention. This contribution perfectly illustrates the Sanskrit term *satya*, which means truth but also the past participle of the verb "to be," the hypocrisy of the lion and the vulture told in the *Hitopadesa*, wavers before the truth of the acts. Action then becomes the sole criterion for the reality of transformation.

Ophira Gamliel invites us to listen to Malayalam songs that also animate the lives of Cochin Jews. These songs are grouped around the Malayalam term *nâtanpâttukal* (p. 46). "The term *nâtanpâttukal* is a modern coinage compounded from *nâtan*, 'of the country' and *pâttukal*, 'songs'." These songs are written in Malayalam but steeped in Sanskrit and Tamil words. The author also mentions (p. 48), "Another type of hybrid involves a different language altogether from Tamil and Sanskrit. These belong solely to the Semitic communities of Kerala: the *Mapillas* composing in Arabi-Malayalam, and the Christians and Jews spicing up their Malayalam and their Hebrew respectively. Malayalam folk songs are not transparent and may require some deciphering, even when the reader is a native speaker." The author has other categories of songs such as songs of possession, songs of clapping hands, and wedding songs in which the prophet Muhammad (p. 69) is cited. These songs reflect a relatively harmonious community life.

Yigal Bronner's contribution celebrates the genius of the Sanskrit language and its inimitable way of saying two things at once through the rhetorical figure called "*slesha*" the evolution of which he retraces. He also retraces the history of the emergence of vernacular languages and their links with Sanskrit, stressing Telugu as the language that could reflect this passage. It would have been interesting if Yigal Bronner could have further clarified the link he sees between sacred language and spoken language and sketched a comparative outline with what is happening in Israel for Hebrew.

Maya Teyet Dayan continues the reflections on Sanskrit poetry by focusing on Nala and Damayanti in the *Naisadhîyacarita* written by Śrîharsa and by asking the metaphysical question, how is the visible invisible?

After this trip through the texts we are invited to "Buddhist voyages." Yael Bentor poses the provocative question, Can women Attain Enlightenment through Vajrayâna Practices? And it is indeed the equality of men and women that is so apprehended in Pali literature, Mahâyâna and Vajrayâna. Despite tensions evident in some texts, men and women are equal in attaining liberation because meditation transcends all differences, and this is particularly emphasized in the Vajrayâna. The author affirms that the Dalai Lama has the same perception (p. 131).

Shlomo Biderman, the author of "Compassion and Beyond," wants to differentiate between Buddhist *karunâ* and what might be called "Western compassion." The latter presupposes a moral framework that the shielded subject suspends to identify, at least partially, with the actual or future suffering of the object of this attitude. This is strikingly illustrated at the very outset by the poignant scene from Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* where the frail monk Zosima unexpectedly kneels before the vicious Dmitri, who is oblivious to his eventual doom while confronting his own father. The Buddha's compassion, on the contrary, implies an unbridgeable chasm between the wisdom (*prajñâ*) founded on introspective "subjectivity" and the (existential) suffering of the (ignorant) object of compassion. The ("turning of the wheel" of the) religious "Law" is itself so dependent on a pre- or supra-moral perspective that *dharma* can be ultimately synonymous with *karunâ*. Whereas Western compassion presupposes or institutes a hierarchical disjunction between subject and object that it thereby attempts to bridge, (the

bodhisattva's) *karunâ* instead confers spiritual detachment by distancing the subject from the common bond of ignorance that otherwise binds it to the object. Biderman clinches this East-West opposition by reverting to the external primacy of the moral Commandment in the Jewish Bible as illustrated by God's displeasure with the reluctant prophet Jonah for his unwillingness to chastise the doomed people of Niniveh. Jonah is able to redeem himself only by renouncing decisively an unseemly "compassion" that runs contrary to God's insistence on Justice. This comparative picture is, however, complicated and muddled by God's own "change of heart" toward the repentant Niniveh that now angers Jonah, redeemed by his righteousness only to find his faithful prophecy of doom belied. An additional twist is provided by Jonah's own bitter compassion for the plant that had shielded him from the scorching sun at the gates of the city but is now blighted by the Divine, yet again "arbitrary," Will. God seems to suggest, in his defense, that lurking behind Jonah's (apparent) "compassion" (including toward Niniveh?) is in reality an all-too-human core of "self-pity" (that prevents him from recognizing that it was God's Mercy that had sprouted the plant to begin with). The impersonal equivalent of God in "atheistic" Buddhism would be the implacable Law of Karma, but the soteriological function of *karunâ* is precisely to dissolve its fetters by eradicating the ignorance that is its root cause. The reader is left with a glimpse of a timeless opposition between Moses and the Buddha, or expressed negatively, between "human servitude" and "selfish compassion"! "Compassion and Beyond" so well exemplifies what Karmic passages might have been by way of a groundbreaking confrontation and bridge between the Indian and the Judaic world-views that it indeed deserves a lengthy review. However, the gulf between the two traditions has been perhaps exaggerated, paradoxically, by Biderman not having pressed this opposition far enough.

The Buddhist *karunâ* coexisted and interacted, in India, for more than a millennium with Brahmanism that was also ruled by a (world-affirming) Dharma (reinterpreted by the Buddha), but more closely aligned with the Mosaic Law as a binding system of prohibitions and injunctions. Presumably, lay Hindus increasingly partook to differing degrees in both Brahmanical (law-oriented, as opposed to *moksha*) and Buddhist (*karunâ*-orientated) understandings of dharma despite the tension between these opposed yet overlapping world-views. Compassion plays a central role in Buddhism only because it presupposes the (first noble) "truth" that "everything is suffering" (*sarvam duhkham*): it wells forth spontaneously in the Enlightened One freed from all suffering toward all beings including those unaware of their own suffering. The Bodhisattva, on the other hand, cultivates such *karunâ* not only to stabilize his detached wisdom (*prajñâ*) but also to ensure that he will remain (or "return") postenlightenment to show lesser beings the way. Yet, compassion of the "Western" kind does not seem to have been foreign to ordinary (i.e., unenlightened) Indians when confronted with suffering of the more mundane kind, for it has been deliberately exploited, alongside all the other emotional attitudes, in the classical theater, which distinguishes between "pity" (*dayâ*), *karunâ* as the aesthetic counterpart of worldly "sorrow" (*shoka*), and enlightened *karunâ* as a mode of supreme detachment (*shânta*). The Buddhist achievement has perhaps been to explore the transformative potential of what is indeed a universal human experience by providing the necessary metaphysical framework. This has allowed Abhinavagupta, the theoretician of the profoundly didactic ("moral") brahmanical theater, to not just endorse but raise *karunâ* to the status of the supreme sentiment.

Boaz Amichay in his study of *Srâvakabhûmi* of Asanga takes us back to the complex relationship between the student and the teacher who evaluates him. It would have been interesting to compare these rules with those of the yeshiva in Israel.

Eviatar Shulman brings us back to more metaphysical problems in Buddhism discussing Nâgârjuna's critique of the concept of impermanence in Buddhism. Indeed, according to the author (p.175), "Two important points must be highlighted regarding

Nâgârjuna's reading of impermanence. The first is that he denies the validity of impermanence as a true characterization of the way things exist. Nothing can be said to arise and cease; in emptiness there are no things to be empty. Secondly, the fact that phenomena appear to be impermanent implies they are illusions, or rather similar to an illusion or a dream." However it is difficult to follow Eviatar Shulman when he says (p. 175), "Impermanence functions in Nâgârjuna's system only as a stepping stone to more profound insights." To our knowledge, impermanence functions the same way in Buddhism. But Eviatar Shulman clarifies (p. 177), "Nâgârjuna's 'insubstantiality' is unambiguously distinct from the Buddha's. For the Buddha, insubstantiality means change and a lack of true identity over time. For Nâgârjuna insubstantiality means unreality and a lack of any identity whatsoever."

The third part of the book, "Sojourns in Contemporary India," the most original, most innovative, articulates well with the title and cover of the book that depicts two aspects of Chennamangalam synagogue in Kerala. Ronie Parciak leads his reader in the discovery of the Other and of the Self (p. 192), "This essay wishes to trace the Israeli yearning to encounter the Self in its full realness in one of the more intensive arenas where his passion is articulated—India [...] India [...] is constructed as the archetypal Other of Israeliness, the other against which it achieves priority and defines itself as an entity possessing solid cultural boundaries." The ritual voyage of the Israelis could be interpreted as a quest for identity as it is difficult for most to know where to place Israel: in Europe, the Middle East, or Asia? But a political issue also looms just beyond because as the author states (p. 193), "Unlike the Arab and the Maghreb countries whose Eastern identity was perceived as a threat to hegemony, India has become the signifier of a non-threatening, non-conflictual Easternness." But the author adds cautiously (p. 194), "The roots of the enormous interests developed in Israel toward India in the modern age can not be separated from the Orientalist thought that constructs the Orient as a sheer Other as well as an object of great yearning." This trip to the East is also latent in the Hebrew word *Kadima* (p. 197): "The Hebrew word *Kadima* (literally onward, as east) fuses two movements: the movement toward the East in the geographical sense and the movement forward, in contrast to decline or regression. At the same time, it is a movement backward, to ancient times. The modern journey to the East has, therefore, become a journey to the source of creation, a move toward an intimate knowledge of the Divine and an attempt to revive it in its full realness within the traveler's consciousness." The author contrasts the two countries (p.202), "Scenes that could be interpreted as 'Biblical' were identified with various Israeli landscapes: huge unbuilt spaces, tents in the desert, ploughing with animals, the *galabia* garment-scenes which are paradoxically link[ed] to the Arab population in Israel." The author also rapidly evokes the Jews of India, stressing their role as a figure of union without developing the idea of self in the other. The author also indicates some historical similarity between India and Israel with regard to confronting the British. She finally understands this passage to India as reflecting an aspect of the current situation in Israel (p. 207), "At the same time India could also hold up a different kind of mirror, one in which Indian Muslims reflected the conflict between Arabs and Jews. If India is often embodied as the Other, then its Muslim citizens might epitomize the other within the Other."

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The analysis of the experience of Israelis in India is pursued by Darya Maoz who says (p. 215) that "Some fifty thousand Israelis travel to India each year." Most Israelis go to India after their military service (p. 216), "Approximately one-third of the interviewees, mainly men, reported experiencing a crisis prior to their trip and ascribed it to their army service, which they defined as frustrating and disheartening." Israelis go to India to escape "what they describe as a materialistic, harsh and stressful society and try to look for refuge in an 'authentic', pure, relaxed, and prime destination" (p. 217). But it is reasonable to wonder about who are the Indians they encounter. Darya Maoz revisits the question of

Israel's situation by writing (p. 219), "India stands in binary opposition to Israel. India is East, while Israel is West." The author states (p. 220), "Many backpackers compared India to an Arab village or town." The Israelis also go to India because they are interested in spirituality (p. 221). "It is almost unacceptable in the Israeli backpacker community in India not to participate in a least one 'course' in Yoga, meditation, Reiki or Kabala (Jewish mysticism)." But the author immediately adds, "There is usually no 'real' interest in the local philosophies," which contradicts what David Shulman and Shalva Weil said in the introduction.

The book ends with an article by Shalva Weil on Esther David (whom we had a chance to meet during the "*Belles Etrangères*" days in Paris in November 2002), who represents perhaps the possibility of understanding the complex relationship between Israel and India because Esther David belongs to the Bene Israel community of Bombay. Her book, *The Walled City*, translated into French, may in fact be the metaphor for her hometown Ahmedabad, India (p. 237) but also, it seems to us, for Jerusalem and can also be, from another perspective, a metaphor of any mental confinement. This book is followed by two other novels *The Book of Esther* (2004) and *The Book of Rachel* (2006), which tell the story of Esther David but also the history of her community, the Bene Israel, which share many values with the Indians but also with the Jews.

The pages of this book illustrate the difficulty of the journey through otherness, the impossible detachment of man and his territory, the complexity of envisaging our destiny otherwise.

Note

¹ This review is dedicated to the memory of Mr. Kolet (Bene Israel), who still led the Jewish community in New Delhi in 1989 and whom I had the chance of meeting several times while I was pursuing my university studies in India. It is also dedicated to the memory of Charles Mopsik, prominent researcher in the field of Kabala, with whom I had the privilege of working in Paris during the preparatory work for our contributions to the book edited by Hananya Goodman, *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York, 1994).