

Gil Ben-Herut. *Śiva's Saints: The Origins of Devotion in Kannada According to Harihara's Ragaḷeḷaḷu*. South Asia Edition. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018. pp. 296.— Reviewed by Suganya Anandakichenin (Universität Hamburg, Germany)

Around the beginning of the second millennium in Southern India, various factors led to a surge of interest in narrating and transmitting the life-stories of God's devotees, who were sometimes poets (like the Vaiṣṇava Āḷvārs) or not (like some of the non-authoring Śaiva Nāyaṅmārs, e.g. Kaṇṇappa Nāyaṅār). This led to the composition of hagiographic works, initially in verse, in Tamil (e.g. *Tiruttoṇṭattokai* by Cuntarar [8th c.], *Tiruttoṇṭar Tiruvantāti* by Nampi Āṅṭār Nampi [12th c.] and the *Periya Purāṇam* by Cēkkilār [12th c.]), and in other Dravidian languages, such as Kannada (*Ragaḷeḷaḷu*)—to which Gil Ben-Herut's masterful study is dedicated—and Telugu (e.g. *Basava Purāṇamu* by Pāḷkuriki Sōmanātha [13th c.]). Each tradition, of course, had its own agenda for producing such works.

Harihara's (13th c.) collection of stories is composed in the simple, local *ragaḷe* metre with prose sections, and uses Middle Kannada rather than Old Kannada. This work, unnamed but known as *Śivaśaraṇara Ragaḷeḷaḷu* (*Ragaḷeḷaḷu* for short), has for its objects the life-stories of Śivabhaktas, who belonged to a vast geographic area that transcended the Kannada-speaking range, including those who composed *vacanas* in Kannada (12th c.) and who are the particular focus of this monograph. The earliest work of its kind in this language, the *Ragaḷeḷaḷu*,

has all but been neglected despite being immensely significant insofar as Kannada *bhakti* literature is concerned.

In his informative introduction, Ben-Herut presents the work in its context, and “offers a rethinking of what we know about the origins of a South Asian religious tradition by analysing a very early, little studied, but important collection of saints’ biographies” (p. 1). In the process, he meticulously points out how the *Ragaḷeḷaḷu* differs from the later Vīraśaiva works, as well as the later Vīraśaivas’ self-perception and views on crucial religious issues, such as what is acceptable and what is not (e.g. temple worship, gender parity, rejection of Brahmanical customs, etc.), and the reasons for such a (sometimes radical) change (e.g. the politico-religious situation during the Vijayanagara period). He also gives a state of the art, pointing out how academic works in the field contributed to the modern perception of what Vīraśaivism is, including A. K. Ramanujan’s influential *Speaking of Siva*.¹

In the first chapter (‘The Poetics of Bhakti’), Ben-Herut gives the literary context *inter alia*, as he first discusses the historical details related to the poet, and then shows in what way the *Ragaḷeḷaḷu* is a pioneering work in more than one respect (choice and treatment of the theme, language, style and metre, target audience, etc.), with its poetic devices deliberately being “less erudite and more local and performative” (p. 58) rather than pan-Indian and Sanskritic. He also seeks to understand why, despite being thought of highly, this work does not seem to have directly inspired many later poets, and was marginalised even by the ‘insiders’.

In the following chapters, Ben-Herut turns his attention to the contents of the work, to analyse how the “world of Kannada Śivabhakti is imagined in the text” (p. 72). The first topics that he takes up are *bhakti* and the *bhakta* (Chapter 2), in which he paints a portrait of the different types of devotion and devotees, who are of a “stunning variety”

¹ A. K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.

(p. 93) and before whose extreme personalities and forms of devotion even the character of Śiva pales. Harihara's acceptance and inclusion of a vast array of people from manifold backgrounds and with diverse worshipping methods point (so long as their devotion to Śiva is absolute) to some of the founding beliefs of the tradition, which was anything but monolithic.

Chapter 3 focuses on the (disharmonious) interactions between the devotees and the society in which they are forced to live, one that practises all manners of discrimination in their view, which is unacceptable for those who rate single-minded devotion to Śiva above anything else in a person, albeit within the religious field. Ben-Herut cautions against seeing in such principles modern notions of egalitarianism or feminism, or even an approval of downright transgressions of socially-established rules by Harihara.

Chapter 4 deals with Brahminism and the literary character of the Brahmin, and related issues such as the importance (or lack thereof) of Vedic knowledge, food choices and taboos, and so forth. Once again, Ben-Herut rightfully insists on the complex and multilayered ways in which the Brahmins and their interactions with the society (read, that of the Śivabhaktas) are portrayed. Here, too, modern ideas about Vīraśaivism tend to flatten out the nuances and offer the simplistic view that Kannada Śivabhakti has always been essentially anti-Brahmanical.

The last two chapters are respectively dedicated to the figure of the 'Other'. Chapter 5 focuses on the 'opponent other', who is part of a larger tradition to which the Śivabhaktas themselves belonged, i.e. mostly, but not exclusively, the Vaiṣṇava. The fight with this Other (who is to be argued with, convinced or at any rate, put up with) is fought out mostly in the locus of the palace, thereby hinting at political competition between rival religious factions for the king's patronage (hence Ben-Herut's including in this work the study of the role and the portrayal of the king in hagiography). Chapter 6 is dedicated to the 'wholly Other', the complete outsider, mostly the Jain, who is also uncomfortably similar. This Other is present in many arenas, including

the temple and home, which makes the relationships with them complex and ambiguous. And dealing with this reviled, dehumanised Other can take terrifying proportions.

In this compulsively readable book, Ben-Herut takes the reader to another world, time and space and has them discover a whole new universe populated by Śivabhaktas. This study is also a must-read because it instructs us about the nuanced origins of Vīraśaivism and shows that this tradition was not always what it is now (or at least what it is thought to be now). The book is also an invaluable resource for knowing further about hagiographic literature in South India. On the whole, *Śiva's Saints* is a positive treat for anyone interested in *bhakti* literature in general, and Dravidian *bhakti* in particular, or indeed, for anyone who seeks to read a scholarly, and yet reader-friendly book on medieval India.