

Peter C. Bisschop: *The Vārāṇasī Māhātmya of the Bhairavaprādurbhāva (A Twelfth-Century Glorification of Vārāṇasī)*, Collection Indologie n°148, Institut Français de Pondichéry / École française d'Extrême-Orient 2021, pp. 190. —

**Reviewed by Marzenna Czerniak-Drożdżowicz
(Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland)**

Peter C. Bisschop's recent publication is yet another valuable addition to the list of seminal works brought out by the Institut Français de Pondichéry and the École française d'Extrême Orient and comprising of critical editions of the hitherto unpublished, often even unknown Sanskrit source texts. On this occasion, Bisschop presents us with an edited text of the *māhātmya* genre related to the development of the Hindu holy sites in India. *Māhātmyas*, be they found in the *purāṇas* or circulating as independent, stand-alone texts, are now viewed as important sources for the later, well-known narratives but also the history of the sacred places, including shrines, many of which have developed into influential temples. The occurrence of this particular type of text is well attested to over centuries, with the *māhātmya* under study, according to the author, being one of the older.

The author bases his work on the manuscript held in the Kaiser Library, Kathmandu (NGMPP C 6/3), which consists of a collection of *māhātmyas* focused on Vārāṇasī, among them, for example, one from the *Skandapurāṇa*, and another, as the author informs us, not extant in any other source. By publishing this particular *māhātmya*, related

to one of the most sacred places in India, the author seeks to enhance our knowledge about and understanding of a particular stream within Brahmanical and Śaiva Hinduism.

In his Introduction, Bisschop reiterates briefly the present state of research on *māhātmyas* and points out that this kind of literature, produced in great profusion from the medieval till modern times covering a broad range of languages, not only Sanskrit but also the vernaculars, deserves more attention from the scholars.

The edited text belongs to the 12th century when Vārāṇasī was ruled by the Gāhaḍavāla dynasty. Like many other texts of this type, the *māhātmya* in focus, too, is intertextual in nature and can be best understood using the model of, as the author calls it, a “palimpsest,” “a literature in the second degree.”

Among the examples of the vast literature connected to Banaras, and the author mentions here research by J. Gengnagel and A. Michaels among others, the present *māhātmya* is one of the early texts praising the *liṅga* which is at the center of the religious life in Banares, namely Viśveśvara or Viśvanātha.

According to Bisschop, the manuscript may be dated to the 12th/early 13th century; it was probably written in Vārāṇasī and seems incomplete (145 folios). An attentive reader may initially wonder as to whether the book’s author speaks here about the whole bulk of the manuscript consisting of several *māhātmyas* or only about the specific, single *māhātmya* in focus, but the matter becomes clear on page 8. Though the *māhātmyas* found in this manuscript claim to belong to particular *purāṇas* mentioned by name, some of them are not known from Purāṇic sources. One may check their claimed affiliations by going through the table of contents provided by the author. As Bisschop observes, one cannot discern any particular logic in the arrangement of the texts as they are placed one after another in quick succession, without any breaks or preceding introductions. The probable title of the whole collection might be *Vārāṇasīmāhātmyasamgraha*.

The author gives convincing reasons for ascribing the *māhātmya* under study not to the *Bhairavaprādurbhāva* of the *Matsyapurāṇa*, but

to the *Bhairavaprādurbhāva* of the *Vāmanapurāṇa* and, considering the textual pointers to the layout of the town, suggests the text's dating as well as a possible author, who seems to have been a local Vārāṇasī pandit.

In the subsequent part, the author presents the narrative structure of the text and describes three main principles of the text which are the narrative content, location, and subject matter. By encompassing these elements, the *māhātmya* establishes itself as a valuable source of knowledge about the cultural history of Vārāṇasī and the development of Brahmanical Hinduism. In the passage about Śiva's *kapālavrata*, it uses esoteric vocabulary specific to the Śaiva Tantric literature and refers to the concepts of Atimārga, Lokamārga, and Lokātītamārga. Especially worth noting is the unique use of the term Atimārga as well as the possible correspondences with the *Svacchandatantra*.

Interestingly, the *māhātmya* also attests to the presence of an open-air Yoginī temple in Vārāṇasī and gives a unique reference to this type of temple which, though typical for medieval India, was rarely referred to in historical sources. The description of ritual performed in this temple points to the Kaula connection and the name of the goddess of this place is given as Siddhayogeśvarī or Piṅgalā, thus suggesting links with the Trika of the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* text. In this way the text helps to locate Tantric traditions and their literature in place and time, the whole matter still a contentious issue demanding more inquiry. The text supplies some interesting data about the part of the city known as Brahmapura, its connection to Kṛṣṇa devotion, and the royal dynasty of Gāhaḍavālas; it also gives evidence for the replacement of the form of the god known as Avimukteśvara by the one known as Viśveśvara-Viśvanātha. Moreover, through the motif of Śiva pining for Vārāṇasī, it provides a narrative frame for the best-known text associated with Vārāṇasī, namely the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*.

In the latter part of the book, the author presents us with specifics of the language of the text, lists some non-Pāṇinian elements, and gives an overview of his editorial policy. He mentions several problems connected with the fact that only one manuscript, that, too, full of errors and scribal corrections, survived, thus the version presented

by the author is not final. Having explained his aim as “to reconstruct, within the limits of probability, the text of the *Vārāṇasīmāhātmya* of the *Bhairavaprādurbhāva* in an earlier state than what the manuscript provides us with, without, however introducing readings of my own,” the author states that he provides us not with a translation but an English synopsis. His apparatus is overall positive but he normalizes some features, however, it is not quite clear what it means that the author uses *śa* and *sa* interchangeably.

The edition is supplemented with a synopsis containing many informative footnotes. The Bibliography and the Index are exhaustive. Overall, it is a very aptly and professionally executed edition and, going through the text, I found only one minor error, namely regarding the footnote 71—glossing Daṇḍapāṇi—which seems to refer to the subsequent sentence.

Our present level of knowledge shows that *māhātmyas* often expound on specific local settings; they testify to processes of assimilation of certain local, even folk elements into a broader, pan-Indian context, equating local deities with particular forms of pan-Indian gods, and local sacred places (water bodies, mountains, etc.) with the mythical ones; sometimes they also introduce and explain local peculiarities of the ritualistic procedures typically employed in the place. Thus, they are the products of particular religious situations, but they are also connected with the historical background of the described and eulogized places.

As in the case of other studies on *māhātmyas*, the current edition by Bisschop proves the value of this kind of text for broadening our knowledge about the cultural developments in different regions and religious locales. I found the publication, being an example of the still-growing interest in *māhātmyas*, very professionally prepared, useful, and valuable material for the study of the cultural history of Vārāṇasī, especially of its being the religious center in the period which until now has not been well known.