

Editorial

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In putting each issue of *RoSA* together, one of our simpler tasks is to decide on the order in which the articles appear. We usually place them in approximate chronological order, in so far as dating is possible in our field. We follow this principle here; but sometimes an article spans more than one period. Each of the four present articles has some chronological depth.

The first has the longest timespan, beginning with early Buddhism and ending in the present. Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā examines attitudes to womanhood in the Pali texts, and the ways in which these attitudes have been recently interpreted. Like Hindu goddess traditions, or Vedic stories of learned women, some Pali texts arouse expectations in modern feminists which may not be fulfilled on closer examination. Women can reach enlightenment, defying the essentializing view that limits them to domestic roles; arahantship transcends gender. On the other hand, only a man can be a Buddha; and rebirth as female can be seen as karmic regression, brought about by a man's failure to be truly masculine, as exemplified by Ānanda. After examining these and other ideas found in the texts, Dhammadinnā turns to today's world, and to those contemporary female Buddhists who seek to 'shape a gender-balanced, androgynous future' for Buddhism, and in some cases to reshape its past. She finds that ideas of the sacred feminine have been imported into Buddhism from unrelated traditions, rather than rediscovered within it.

The second article on Buddhism is concerned with the seventh to twelfth centuries, in the Pāla and Sena kingdom in Bihar and Bengal, and uses archaeological material. Birendra Nath Prasad, who contributed an article about the north-eastern frontier of this region in *RoSA* 6.1, examines the question of why Brahmanical deities and symbols are found at Buddhist sites. Some monks seem to have kept small images of such deities, as private objects of devotion; and some sites include large stone images. These contrast with sculptures representing the violent conquest of Brahmanical deities by wrathful Buddhist deities. Some have explained this as peaceful coexistence or symbiosis; others as a bid for popularity. Prasad prefers the view that Brahmanical deities were accepted by a strategy of 'subordinate integration'. But, he continues, this strategy had the unintended consequence of blurring the distinction between the two traditions, so that Buddhism was eventually absorbed by Brahmanism. Further, many donors of images did not have a cultic identity as Buddhists or devotees of any Brahmanical deity; for them, there were no boundaries to be blurred.

On the other hand, Ayesha Irani's article shows a sharpening of religious boundaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She traces the vicissitudes of a Bengali (or Bangla) text, the *Nabīvaṃśa* of Saiyad Sultān, whose Arabic-Sanskrit title aptly indicates both its theme, the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, and its form, a verse narrative of epic proportions. It was composed in the seventeenth century, in the far east of Bengal, and circulated both in Bengali script and orally. In the nineteenth century, Bengali Muslims came to favour Arabic script, while the largely Hindu class who promoted the study of Bengali literature tended to ignore Muslim works. Moreover, the Persianized *dobhāṣī* ('bilingual') Bangla which evolved in the eighteenth century, and was favoured by Muslim writers in the nineteenth, was different not only from the Sanskritized *sādhu bhāṣā* favoured by the Hindu élite, but also from the language of the *Nabīvaṃśa*. As a result, this text failed to take advantage of the print revolution which affected South Asian literature in the early nineteenth century. Irani's study involves the history of book production and the format of books, and the influence of nationalist politics and of social attitudes to language.

David J. Strohl's article, being based on his fieldwork among Ismaili Muslims in Mumbai, is strictly contemporary, though he provides some historical background to suggest how the community's distinctive approach to religious pluralism arose. He describes the Ismailis' efforts to reach out to members of other religious communities, while maintaining their tradition of reticence about their own beliefs and practices; in practical terms, this means 'excluding non-Ismailis from their religious life and demonstrating an openness towards difference in their social life'. He contrasts this approach, which he calls 'engaging tolerance', with those approaches which call for understanding of differences through dialogue. He goes on to show how the Ismailis interact with other communities through voluntary service. They regularly

use the Sanskrit term *sevā*—whose history Gwilym Beckerlegge traced in *RoSA* 9.2—rather than the Arabic *khidmat*. They see *sevā* as offered not merely to humankind, but to their Imam, the Aga Khan.

Taken together, these articles exemplify the variety of ways in which religious differences have been treated in South Asia, and among those who look to South Asia for inspiration. The encounter of Theravāda Buddhism with modern feminism has led to drastic reinterpretations on the part of those who uphold both. The integration of Brahmanical deities into Buddhist practice is akin to the ‘inclusivism’ which Paul Hacker considered characteristic of India, whereby a figure from a rival tradition is incorporated and at the same time subordinated. The *Nabīvaṃśā* used a Hindu literary form to frame a portrayal of the prophet of Islam; but it failed to retain a place in a world in which Hindus and Muslims increasingly separated from each other in language, in cultural life, and in politics. The Ismailis—a minority within a minority—engage with others in ways which emphasize common humanity, while keeping differences in the private sphere.