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***Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North  
India (2016)***

Edited by **Francesca Orsini & Catherine Butler Schofield**

Book Review

Investigating into materials from early modern and contemporary North India, this work brings together seventeen first-rate papers written by different scholars on the relations between written and oral texts, their performance, and the musical traditions these performances have given way to. The articles compiled in this volume are written by some of the best scholars in the field and cover a wide range of literary genres and social and cultural contexts across various regions of India. The texts and practices are contextualized in relation to the broader social and political background in which they emerged, showing how religious affiliations, caste dynamics and political concerns played a role in shaping social identities as well as aesthetic sensibilities. By doing so this book sheds light into theoretical issues of multifaceted significance, such as textual versus oral norms; the features of oral performance and improvisation; the role of the text in performance; the aesthetics and social dimension of performance; the significance of space in performance history and important considerations on repertoires of story-telling. This book is an essential reading for anyone with an interest in South Asian language, culture and, more generally, in the theory and practice of oral literature, performance and story-telling.

There are total 4 sections in the book and all the articles are accommodated under these 4 sections. The first section, which is titled as "Between Text and Practices", covers a large spectrum of themes pertaining to the socio-cultural milieu of the early modern north India. For example, in the article titled "The Example in

Dadupanthi Homiletics", the focus is on how the religious sermons were preached by different religious heads at different points in time. The author also shows us how the *chaumasas*, the four months of the rainy season, still play a vital role in the religious activities of the dadupanthis. The same section in the book also discusses the practice of translation adopted by jain saints to make the major jain works available into the vernaculars and how the practice was instrumental in promoting the vernaculars. In addition to this, another article in the section explores the way early sufi tales were narrated and circulated not only to disseminate a particular notion of salvation but were also used to propagate a historical imagination.

The second section of the book prioritizes the oral text over the written text and argues how certain texts were meant only for performance. It discusses how the most common way to consume the songs of the saints of Maharashtra was through a live performance called *Kirtan*. The oral performances of the works of Dyaneshwar and Namdev across different periods are discussed further to substantiate this argument. This section demonstrates how one can read the written archive of bhakti materials in a way that reveals the logic of oral performances and emphasizes the telling rather than the text. It is in the similar line of thought that the genres like *kissa/dastan* are explored; its popularity prior to the emergence of 'modern' genres such as novel and its relative obscurity in the contemporary times.

The third section of the book, which is titled "Written Clues about the Performed Texts", there is an attempt to examine the works of authors such Keshava Das and Surati Mishra and explore the traces of 'performativity' of the texts which are otherwise known only in their written form. The propositions made in this section emphasize the parallel existence of performative versions of the written texts of the above authors, and more often than not the performed version of the text was the only text known and recognized by the patrons and the written text served merely as a source of reference. The 'performed texts' had the privilege of free circulation and were not circumscribed by the linguistic limitations. For example, certain genres

such as *mushairas*, *tazkira* stories and *qasidas* which were more specific to Persian literary culture were consistently performed at several royal courts during and after Mughal India .

The fourth and the last section of the book focuses on the works such as Bhima Kabi's *Dangavai Katha*, Alam's *Madhavnal Kamakandala*, Isardas's *Satyawati Katha* and Tulasi Das' *Ramacharitmanas*. The assiduously examines how these *kathas* based on epic-puranic frame were instrumental in formulating the culture of story-telling. The multiple cases of intertextuality in these works also indicate towards the existence of many *Ramayanas* and *Mahabharatas*. Authors from this section have also attempted to find out the traces of orality in in many of these works, which in a way reestablishes authority of the performed/oral text over the written.

It can be deduced that this extensive study by Orsini and Schofield not only provides a new insight into the colonial historiography but also opens new avenues of research which explore the oral and performative dimensions of a composition. The approach employed in this book helps the readers to look beyond the conventional categories such as "author" and "text" and explores the role of "oral-literates"(a term used by V. Narayana Rao to refer to pundits, poets, storytellers and orators) while looking at the engagements with a text prior to the inception of print culture. The book will be of particular interest of the researchers working in area of colonialism, historiography and language politics and will provide a different angle in critiquing the colonial "meta-narratives". It will also help the researchers to subvert the established and stagnated perceptions pertaining to the functions of a work and will serve as a model to those pursuing their research in the area of orality and literature.