



Annette Wilke and Oliver Moebus, *Sound and Communication: An Aesthetic Cultural History of Sanskrit Hinduism*

Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2011. xxiii + 1112 pages. Incl. 1 music CD. Hardcover/CD-ROM, €169.95/ US\$238.00; print/ebook, €259.00/US\$363.00; ebook, €169.95/US\$238.00. ISBN 978-3-11-024003-0.

ANNETTE WILKE and Oliver Moebus have written a densely annotated book of well over a thousand pages on the topic of sound as foundational to Indian culture. The book is highly theoretical and focuses on texts and the long Indian philosophical tradition of distinguishing sound as India's fundamental cosmological principle, and sounds as its fundamental particles, in an extended discourse every bit as nuanced as the search for quarks and bosons today. They address music, and more broadly, sound, in three senses: its propositional or semantic content, its scriptural or material existence and function, and its performative possibilities.

Bracing for an extended theoretical and historical treatment, I was pleased that practice and actual sounds make more than cameo appearances. The authors begin with the self-evident proposition that “in India one can only speak of texts at all in a sense that includes audible words” (7). This is to differentiate India from other cultures that provide little (or less) valency to ideas that do not require vocal articulation for their legitimacy or proper materialization. Even if I doubt that India is unique in this regard, I cannot be detained by that in a review. The authors defend their premise by presenting the old Indian notion of *nāmarūpa*, that sound and form are equivalent, that they have been long celebrated as different and inviolably connected aspects of the same phenomenon, with considerable philosophical nuancing. This theoretical position arises from centuries, or millennia, of philosophical production in India, in which ideas, notions, and entities must be articulated because they bear sound correspondences that are considered sacrosanct and inviolable, the former because of the latter. The authors explore this at length: they discuss the spread of Sanskrit in India; the nature of oral communication and transmission in India; the nature of “audible text” rather than “oral literature”; the nature of revelation; “acoustic piety,” memory and mnemonic systems; a variety of aesthetic systems; the early development of musical instruments; theories of mantra; etymology as representation of reality; the phonology of reality; the Pūrvamīmāṃsā representation of language; the levels of speech explored by the fifth-century philosopher Bhartṛhari; and the tenth-century Abhinavagupta, and much more.

The authors have not edited their book. Everything is there. Some of it, such as their long discussion of Tantric interpretation of sound, is better treated in A. PADOUX's magnum opus (1990). This leads to another very long discussion on *nāda-brahman*, the absolute as constituted by sound. The authors explore this as it appears in the well-known thirteenth-century text of music theory, the *Saṅgīta-Ratnākara* by Śārngadeva. Part of the greatness of Wilke and Moebus's book is the magisterial sweep of the authors; they have clearly spent decades sifting through Tantric and musicological literature, most of it in Sanskrit. They often interweave

their presentation with modern yogic views, including those held by the Radha Soamis, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, New Age spiritual schools, and other advocates of visionary (or auditory) experience. Yet the robust sweep of the book in the end strikes this reviewer as what is called in Sanskrit criticism *atideśa*, overextension. One can argue that one is on safer ground with a more dedicated treatment of Tantric phonology, such as Padoux's, or the theory of *nāda-brahman* in BERENDT (1983). One topic that is very well covered here and is of great interest to this reviewer is mnemonic practices, the history of their transmission, and the details of Vedic recitation. Wilke and Moebus tell this story well, and have clearly explored the relevant source material such as the *śikṣā* texts and extant Vedic traditions. Like many others, they have often resorted to Western musical transcriptions of Indic mantra (for example, page 335, the first verse of the famous Puruṣasūkta, Ṛgveda 10.90), which cannot always adequately represent Indian sound or vocal changes. This issue is rarely acknowledged. Much of this book is occupied in the authors' virtuosity and erudition. Not only are there frequent references to music and sound theory in their modern Indic representations, but one finds frequent comparisons with Islam and the Qur'an, the Bible, Plato, Beethoven's symphonies, Bach's fugues, and much more, most of it to good effect. Similarly, the authors' concern with theory of language (and the limits of language) and with aesthetics and poetics rather than with cognitive theory also serves them well. The accompanying CD has many examples of very good chants. But for a book in excess of a thousand pages, it would have been much more appropriate if the cuts were complete instead of very brief fragments, a few seconds in length. Most of the cuts are quite ordinary, even if they illustrate the points made in the book. At best this reveals that the authors' true aim is to establish, at often extravagant length, a theoretical model, albeit one that is situated and contextualized. This is squarely a work of classical Western scholarship; for an Anglophone audience the constant references to German scholarship will be valuable. But there are no references at all to Indian scholarship in Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, or any other Indian language, and the topics covered in this book have been studied deeply and developed by Indian scholars. Nevertheless, this is an important book, and all scholars who wish to write on the topic of sound and its ideological and practical development in India must now check this book throughout their writing.

REFERENCES

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Frederick M. Smith
University of Iowa