

vernacular oral epics has only recently begun, let us hope that more publications will soon follow.

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SOIFER, DEBORAH A. *The Myths of Narasimha and Vāmana: Two Avatars in Cosmological Perspective*. SUNY Series in Hindu Studies. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991. xiv+321 pages. Figures, appendices with translations of myths, bibliography, index. Paper US \$16.95; ISBN 0-7914-0800-0. Hardcover US\$49.50; ISBN 0-7914-0799-3.

*The Myths of Narasimha and Vāmana* is an excellent study of Narasimhāvatāra (the fourth avatar of Viṣṇu) and Vāmanāvatāra (the fifth avatar of Viṣṇu) as portrayed in the eighteen multiforms of the Narasimha tale and the thirty multiforms of the Vāmana tale that are found in the *Vedas*, *Brāhmaṇas*, and *Purāṇas*. Soifer finds particular significance in the complementarity of this pair of avatars.

Beginning with an analysis of Viṣṇu in the *Vedas*, Soifer discusses the foundation

of his later transformation into an avataric figure. The vedic Viṣṇu is characterized by a benevolence toward mankind, by an alliance with Indra, by his taking of three giant strides across the universe, and by his ability to take on different forms. These characteristics become the basis for the tale of Vāmana, the dwarf avatar.

Soifer's clear and uncomplicated explanations contribute to the interest and usefulness of her chapter on the cosmology of the *Purāṇas*. She shows how the puranic cosmology is particularly relevant to the understanding of these two avatars, and discusses the interdependence of the concepts of dharma, yuga, and avatar.

Soifer classifies the various multiforms of the Narasimha and Vāmana tales according to their syntagmatic structure. She also discusses a number of important motifs: 1) the special relationship with Indra; 2) invocation of a cosmogonic scenario; 3) mediating power and activity, 4) action through trickery; and 5) the loophole in the law. She shows how the liminality of these motifs relates to the mediating roles of Vāmana and Narasimha in connection with imagery of the periodic pralayaic dissolutions.

Soifer's analysis of the development of the Narasimha narrative from the *Mahābhārata* to the *Purāṇas* is very insightful. She points out that a significant change in emphasis occurred, with the stress shifting from the battle between the demon Hiraṇyakashipu and the man-lion Narasimha to the relationship between Narasimha as Viṣṇu avatar and Prahlada (Hiraṇyakashipu's son) as bhakta devotee. The shift away from a heroic battle to regain the world from the asura forces toward the more important message of bhakti devotion provides a very clear example of the influence of the bhakti cult. In the case of Vāmana, the emphasis shifts from the Viṣṇu avatar's nature as a trickster in defeating the demon Bali to Bali's transformation into a bhakta devotee. For both Narasimha and Vāmana, the ability to liberate their demonic foes becomes paramount.

The only thing missing from this excellent scholarly study is a discussion of the significance of these tales for modern Vaisnavas: do the tales have any bearing on religious observance or festival practice? I recommend *The Myths of Narasimha and Vāmana* as a textbook for courses on Indian religious concepts and Indian narrative traditions. It will also be of great interest to the general reader who wants to learn more about Indian thought.

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