

BOOK REVIEW

Ganga to Mekong: a cultural voyage through textiles, by Hema Devare, Singapore, ISEAS Publishing, 2016, 197 pp.

During his 1927 visit to Java, Rabindranath Tagore uttered a string of words that would be scholarly fodder for decades to come: "I see India everywhere. But I don't recognize it". In *Ganga to Mekong: A Cultural Voyage through Textiles*, Hema Devare references Tagore in an effort to describe the central concern of her book: the "cultural synthesis" between Indian and Southeast Asian textiles (p. 13). In so doing, Devare positions herself within a line of scholarly enquiry that stretches back to George Cœdès and R.C. Majumdar, and which makes "Southeast Asia seem like an extended cultural realm of India" (p. xvii).

Devare is, by her own account, new to research. A freelance writer and playwright, her fascination with the textiles of Southeast Asia, "and the zeal to acquire them", began in the early 1980s when she lived in Burma and later Indonesia with her diplomat husband. These experiences opened up "a whole new world of fabrics for me, fabrics which looked familiar yet were not Indian" (p. xiii).

Ganga to Mekong recounts Devare's personal exploration of what she calls the "historical secrets" (p. xiv) between Southeast Asian and Indian textiles. This book is dense with descriptions of cloth, colours and symbols. The result is at times overwhelming, given the enormous diversity of textile traditions in Southeast Asia. Although Devare includes most Southeast Asian countries in her considerations (the exception being Timor-Leste), she affords Indonesia the closest treatment.

Devare devotes an entire chapter to the cultural legacy of patola, awarding it almost mythical status. Patola is a double-ikat silk, produced by separately tie-dyeing and weaving together both the warp and the weft threads in a complicated and time-intensive process. For Devare, this fabled cloth "came from India like a royal queen and became a celebrity in Southeast Asia", seducing royals and the masses alike with its attributes both magical and mystical (pp. 146–147). "Gringsing is Indonesia's answer to the patola of Gujarat" (p. 170), and the double-ikat technique also continues in Japan.

Two chapters examine trade between India and Southeast Asia and Indian textiles "entering the realm of Southeast Asian society" (p. 14). Elsewhere, a subsection titled "Plangi, Luntaya, Acheik" (p. 141) – which refer to, respectively, tie-dyeing of finely woven cloth, a technique used on Burmese silk tapestry, and a Burmese horizontal weave technique – includes a discussion about the arrival of Europeans in Southeast Asia and the connections between the textile and spice trades.

A brief section examines the impact of technological developments in Europe on Indian textile production. From the eighteenth century onwards, England began to produce machine-made, Indian-style fabrics. Consequently, after centuries of exporting its own fabrics, India became instead a source of raw cotton for Lancashire mills. Heavy taxes were placed on imported Indian fabrics, which served to further penalise Indian weavers and textile merchants. The author also briefly considers gender. Devare describes the "sisterhood of textiles" (p. xiv), and states that women are "especially synonymous with the textile tradition" (p. xiii). In Burma, for example, the thick weave of the silk is "a perfect example of the strong character of the Burmese women, their enduring and uncompromising character" (p. xiii). Such statements are not expanded on in depth.

The book is lavishly illustrated with textiles from India and Southeast Asia. Patola feature heavily. There are many ceremonial photos and images of cloth and clothing from temple reliefs, including at Angkor Wat. The book is a good visual introduction to Indian and Southeast Asian textiles. Specialists will regret that many cloths are undated and not identified by location. Such information would allow readers to chart the changes in textile and costume preference that have occurred over time and space, and that indicate the religious, social and other contexts in which the pieces were produced and used.

Devare sees textiles as imbued with both personal and national significance, not only representing the personality of the individual weaver but personifying an entire country. Rich and colourful, they are “the perfect symbols of the culture they represent” (p. xiii). There is a risk here in burdening textiles with the weight of cultural representation. They may become fossilised as historic symbols of beauty and craftsmanship and seen primarily as objects to be studied and acquired. While Devare clearly recognises the value of textiles as historical sources, she presents Southeast Asian textiles primarily as a response to Indian influence. She does not focus on the innovation and constant reinvention of textile traditions in Southeast Asia. From this perspective, Southeast Asia remains an extended cultural realm of India.

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