

Vaishnavism as Fine Literature

Yale University (New Haven, CT)

May 27-29, 2022

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Scholars Won't Get It but Devotees Will: A Contested Place of Devotion in the History of Sanskrit Aesthetics

Rasa is fluid, both literally and conceptually. A long-standing discussion on the validity of the ninth rasa is a well-known example. Whether devotion can be rasa or not is another contested topic. With the rise of devotional movements, the concept of bhakti became a central theme in the literature and the soteriological texts of medieval South Asia. In the history of Sanskrit aesthetics Daṇḍin's Kāvyaḍarśa (seventh-eighth century) already addressed bhakti. In the context of Śaiva devotion, Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa (ninth-tenth century) used the term bhakti-rasa. However, theoreticians such as Abhinavagupta (tenth century) and Hemacandra (twelfth century) argued that bhakti is not an independent rasa. It was against this background that Vopadeva and Hemādri, both from Maharashtra in the thirteenth century, claimed that bhakti can be rasa. By examining their works on the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, a prominent text in the Vaiṣṇava milieu, I hope to highlight the fluidity of rasa, which allowed theoreticians to include various components into the category based on their theological commitment.