STRĪRĀJYA: INDIAN ACCOUNTS OF KINGDOMS OF WOMEN

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India's literatures contain a number of accounts of kingdoms of women which are often described by the Sanskrit term *strīrājya*. These stories share many features with similar accounts in Greek, Chinese and Tibetan and other literatures, and this has given rise to speculation about their origin and the relationship between them. The question is complicated by the fact that the term *strīrājya* and its equivalents have been applied to a number of very different types of "lands of women" including at least three distinct and sometimes conflated Indian legends. The oldest of the Indian accounts is a Buddhist tale. According to one version, the *Siṃhalāvadāna* of the *Guṇakāraṇḍavyūha*, there was once a merchant named Siṃhala from the kingdom of Siṃhakalpa who set off on a trading mission with 499 other merchants. In the course of their voyage they suffered shipwreck and found themselves stranded on the island of Tāmradvīpa. To their delight its only inhabitants turned out to be beautiful and accommodating young women in whose arms they soon forgot their maritime misfortune. After the merchants had pleasured themselves with the Tāmradvīpans for seven days, the lamp in Siṃhala's room spoke to him in a human voice, introducing itself as the deity Avalokiteśvara and informing the surprised merchant that the women of Tāmradvīpa were actually demonesses (*rākṣasī*) who transformed themselves into beautiful women and eventually devoured all unfortunates marooned on their island. Then, hearing cries of distress, Siṃhala went outside, climbed up on a tree, looked over the walls of an iron fortress and he saw a crowd of prisoners inside who told him that they, too, were shipwrecked merchants imprisoned by the *rākṣasīs* and were being devoured one after the other. Siṃhala returned to his room and Avalokiteśvara instructed him to make his way with his companions to the seashore where they would find a winged horse named Balāha which would carry them to safety beyond the sea. Siṃhala was warned that no one was to turn and look back at Tāmradvīpa after they had mounted Balāha. Siṃhala

and his fellows then fled to the beach and climbed on the back of the horse. Despite the warnings, the other merchants began thinking of the pleasures they were leaving behind, turned for a last fond look, fell off and were eaten up by the pursuing *rakṣasīs*. Siṃhala alone was saved.[1]

This legend appears in various forms in the languages of Buddhist Asia, including Pāli, Nevarī, Tibetan, Chinese, Khotanese and Japanese (Lienhard 1985: 15); there is an Indonesian version and even an Ainu one (Pelliot 1963: 723, 683). In some versions of the story the island of the *rākṣasīs* is identified with Siṃhala, i.e. Ceylon, which also happens to be the name of the merchant above. The 7th-century Chinese monk Xuanzang wrote that the *rākṣasī* inhabitants of Siṃhala seduce, then devour shipwrecked sailors (Jay 1996: 221). This identification is a natural one since Siṃhala or Laṅkā, another of the island's many names, is best known as the home of Rāma's enemy, the demon king Rāvaṇa.

A different theme, one subject to a very great deal of variation, describes a kingdom of women inhabited by *yoginīs*, i.e. sorceresses. Its best known manifestation is the version told by the Nātha cult which appears in the Bengali tale known as the *Gorakṣa-* or *Gorkha bijay* (see Dasgupta 1946: 212–213). According to it Matsyendranātha or Mīnanātha, the founder of the Nātha sect, offended the goddess Pārvatī and as a result was cursed to forget his occult abilities and remain enchanted in Kadalī, a land whose sole inhabitants were sixteen hundred women. There sexual indulgence sapped his strength and Matsyendranātha was only days away from death when he was rescued by his disciple Gorakṣa who made his way into the palace of Kadalī disguised as a female dancer. Gorakṣa first sang songs in enigmatic language in an effort to wake Mīnanātha from his trance and remind him of his true identity and when this failed, he brought him to his senses by means of a miracle.[2] Bengali versions of this tale are not very old. The theme was also treated by the 14th-century Maithili poet Vidyāpati in a play also entitled *Gorakṣa vijaya*. Only fragments of it have survived.

Another and very different version is found in – of all places – Sanskrit biographies of the philosopher Śaṅkara. There we are told that Śaṅkara, forced to master the science of erotics (*kāmaśāstra*) in order to win a debate, used his yogic powers to leave his own body and reanimate the corpse of a recently deceased king so that he could acquire the necessary knowledge in his harem. According to the biographer Mādhava, Śaṅkara was inspired by the example of Matsyendranātha who also "entered into the body of a dead king". Once he had occupied the body of the king, Śaṅkara forgot his own identity so his worried disciples disguised themselves as musicians and sang songs to him to bring him back to his senses in the same way that Gorakṣanātha had done (SD 9.79ff.). This story is also alluded

1 Lienhard 1985: 9–15. For another version see Lewis 1995: 151–169.

2 This the version of the story in GB.

to in the older *Śaṅkaravijaya* of Anantānandagiri. The form of the story adopted by Śaṅkara's biographers is also found in a Nātha text, the *Yogisampradāyā viṣkṛti*[3] where we are told that Matsyendranātha took over the body of a dead king of Kāmrūp in order to disport himself in his harem (Dvivedī 1966: 53).

Another variant appears in the *Dharma maṅgal* of Sahadeb Cakrabortī, a Middle Bengali work. According to it, Matsyendranātha spoke disrespectfully to the goddess and was as a consequence sent to Kadalī Pāṭan the female inhabitants of which transformed him into a sheep. Later Matsyendranātha was released from his ovine state by Gorakṣanātha. (Dasgupta 1946: 368, n. 2.) This is the most common and widespread version of the story. A *Janam sākhī*, an Old Panjabi biography of Gurū Nānak, describes the visit of Nānak and his disciple Mardānā to Kaurū, "a land ... where no man was to be found. Women rule the country, in all the villages, women receive the earnings, not the men" (B40, p. 89). Mardānā was curious about the place and entered it despite Gurū Nānak's warnings. When he went to a house to beg for food, a woman invited him inside and bound his hands with a thread thereby instantly transforming him into a ram. When Gurū Nānak came in search of his disciple, his arrival was reported to Nūr Shāhi, "the head of all the conjurers", who ordered her subjects to assemble and cast spells on him. When the women tried to bind Gurū Nānak with their threads, he merely laughed and the thread binding Mardānā's hands burst, returning him to human form. When all her mantras and charms failed, Nūr Shāhī realized that Gurū Nānak's powers were superior to hers and became a Sikh.[4]

Turning men into beasts by means of an enchanted thread is a traditional magic technique in India. The *Kathāsaritsāgara*, for example, contains a story about how the daughter of a merchant was given a string (*sūtra*) by a sorceress (*yoginī*) with the help of which she transformed her lover into a monkey, thus concealing him from her father (KSS 7.3.110). The name of the land visited by Gurū Nānak, Kaurū, is Kāmrūp or Assam, a natural location for a community of sorceresses. Kāmrūp was also known as Pragjyotiṣapura, 'The City of Eastern Astrologers', and has always been considered a land of magic; some scholars claim that it was there that the Tantric form of Hinduism originated as well as the place where Vajrayāna Buddhism first appeared (Barua 1966: 9–10). Towards the end of the 17th century the Muslim writer Shihabuddin, who accompanied Mir Jumlah on his invasion of Assam wrote that

> the people of Hindustan used to call the inhabitants of Assam sorcerers and magicians and consider them as standing outside the human species. They say that whoever enters this country is overcome by charms and never comes out of it.[5]

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3 This is a Hindi work said to be a translation by Candranāth Yogī (Dasgupta 1946: 374, n. 5).

4 This is the version in B40.

5 Quoted in Gait 1963: 148.

Kāmrūp is also associated "with legends and facts of female predominance", as, for example, a belief among the Naga tribe that there is a village in the North-East which is entirely inhabited by women (Kakati 1948: 40). The Khasi, a matriarchal tribe of modern Meghalaya, also come to mind in this connection. Apparently these different ideas meshed giving rise to the notion of a kingdom of female magicians in Assam. Still today pilgrims visiting the Kāmākhyā temple outside Gauhati are warned about *yoginīs* who transform unwary travelers into roosters.

Elsewhere in India Bengal has similar associations, or, perhaps, is confused with Assam. A Rajasthani Nātha tale tells us that Gopī Cand, the king who gave up his throne to become a Nātha yogi, once went to visit his sister in Bengal in spite of his mother's warnings about seven dangerous sorceresses who dwelt there. As soon as Gopī Cand reached Bengal, he found himself surrounded by the seven women, each of whom belonged to a different caste. When they realized that he possessed no magic and so was defenseless against them, the queen of the magicians transformed him into a parrot. Later the woman from the oil-presser caste asked for the parrot and changed it into a young ox which she hitched to her oil press. Passed from one woman to the other, Gopī Cand was subsequently turned into a donkey, rooster and various other creatures until his guru Jalīnder Nātha finally came to the rescue. Jalīnder defeated the women in a magic duel and transformed them all into donkeys. (Gold 1993: 226–264.) A Bhojpurī story tells a similar tale, where two *baṅgalinī* witches who ruled a *strī kā rāj* transform the hero Lorik first into a sheep and then into a parrot before he is rescued by Durgā (Pandey 1995: 151ff.).

Northwestern India has similar associations. Tibetan texts describe the land of Uḍḍiyāna, the Swat Valley, as a land of *ḍākinīs* or *yoginīs* who are skilled in the magical arts and capable of transforming themselves into animals at will (Shaw 1991: 229, n. 18). Uḍḍiyāna is said to be an ideal place for women to study because of all the female teachers found there (Shaw 1994: 105). A Tibetan traveler writes that the *ḍākinīs* of the region

> go [to cemeteries] for secret practices and in the night one can see corpses rising from the soil; there are also many ḍākinīs black, naked, carrying in their hands human hearts or intestines and emanating fire from their secret parts (Tucci 1971: 414).

According to another story, the redoubtable Siddha Lāvapā turned the tables on the hostile *ḍākinīs* by transforming them into sheep and clipping off the wool (Tucci 1971: 399).

These widespread tales of faraway northern lands ruled by predatory female magicians reflect the most common Indian conception of a land of women. The original version of the story undoubtedly is about a land where sorceresses transformed men into beasts, most likely sheep, and made them their slaves. The Bengali

Nātha made use of it by transforming it into an allegory illustrating the fatal consequences of sexual indulgence (cf. Dasgupta 1946: 222).

A number of Sanskrit texts refer to another, different *strīrājya* of a much less well defined character. The 6th-century *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* of Varāhamihira, which deals with geography among other subjects, mentions a *strīrājya* in a list of the lands situated in the northwest (BS 14.22; Kirfel 1967: 88). The term is also found in the *Mahābhārata* where the plural, *strīrājyāḥ*, occurs as alongside mention of a *strīrājyādhipati*, 'king of the *strīrājya*'.[6] This land is rarely referred to in the *purāṇas*,[7] but there is an interpolation in the *Skandapurāṇa* containing a list of seventy five countries of Bhāratavarṣa, the fifty-seventh of which is called *strīrājya* (Sircar 1971: 259). In all these texts the *strīrājya* is merely included on long lists of various countries and never described. Perhaps the earliest mention of the *strīrājya* is in the *Kāmasūtra* of Vātsyāyana, which was written between the 4th and 6th centuries. There, in the chapter on love-bites (*daśanacchedya*), we are told that,

> *dṛḍhaprahaṇanayoginyaḥ kharavegā eva apadravyapradhānāḥ strīrājye kośalāyāṃ* (Kām 5.27).
>
> To satisfy the women of Strīrājya and Kośalā violent practices and firm blows, and even *apadravya*[8] are required.

A commentary places this *strīrājya* west of the region of Vajravanta (Kirfel 1967: 80).

Some of the above texts seem to refer to a place which was real or considered to be as real as Kośalā, but we cannot, however, be certain that all of the texts are referring to the same place or the same kind of "woman's country", especially since the plural is sometimes used. Chinese sources contain numerous references to countries called *nüerguo* or *nüziguo*, 'women's countries', and *nüwangguo*, 'woman-ruled countries'. These are of two types: countries of a mythical or fantastic character and countries mentioned in historical documents. (Jay 1996: 221.) Accounts of the first type include tales of women living in maleless lands who mate with apes, dogs or demons; another common motif describes how they become pregnant by bathing in or drinking water from a certain river or well, or by exposing themselves to the wind (Pelliot 1963: 680). This category corresponds to the Indian tales of lands of *rākṣasīs* and *yoginīs*. The Sanskrit references to a *strīrājya* on the other hand could possibly refer to a real place or places. The notion of a country ruled by

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6 See the references in Sörensen 1900 and Mani 1975.

7 It is not mentioned, for example, in Ali 1973.

8 The term *apadravya* is translated into English as dildo and into Hindi as *banāvaṭī liṅga*. In a personal communication, Professor Rahul Peter Das informs me that in his commentary on the *Kāmasūtra* (Mumbai: N.S. Press, 1891, p. 136) Yaśodhara glosses the term *apadravyāni* as *kṛtrimasādhanāni* and says such devices should be used when the penis is smaller than the vagina. Thus it can also indicate a device for making the penis seem larger.

women might have been inspired by second-hand knowledge of the matriarchal customs or the polyandrous practices found in various regions north of India, information can have been misinterpreted as describing countries ruled by a gynecocracy. D. C. Sircar, for example, suggests that the *strīrājya* described in the *Skandapurāṇa* might have been a "woman-dominated state" in the Himalayan region and suggests the Kumarī cult of the Newars of the Kathmandu valley contributed to that notion (Sircar 1971: 259).

Other scholars argue that the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* and other texts refer to an Amazon kingdom. Many accounts of Central Asian women warriors were in circulation, including traveler's tales. The French physician François Bernier, who was in India between the years 1656 and 1668, describes a dinner given him by Uzbek diplomats in Delhi. The Frenchman writes that he was not impressed with the food (pulao with horse meat) offered by his hosts or their table manners, but he was struck by an anecdote they related to him: "They proceeded to extol the strength and valor of their country-women", wrote Bernier, "in comparison with whom the Amazons were soft and timorous." The Uzbeks related how thirty mounted bandits once plundered a village in Central Asia, capturing all the inhabitants among whom was an old woman who warned the robbers about her daughter and advised them to flee while they could. The bandits only laughed but shortly thereafter the woman told them that her daughter had come, and the girl killed fifteen of the bandits in short order with as many arrows and then drew her sword and killed the survivors. (Bernier 1891: 122–123.) Another, involuntary, European traveler, Hans Schiltberger, who was captured at the battle of Adrianople, in 1398 and spent thirty-two years as a slave in Central Asia, mentions in his memoirs a battle won by giant Tartar Amazons led by a vengeful princess (Boorstin 1985: 143). Chinese sources describe the Yida, a warlike Indo-Scythian tribe and a polyandrous society ruled by women. It sent a tribute mission to the Tang court in 610. (Jay 1996: 223.)

The most familiar Amazons are those described at length in Greek literature centuries before the term *strīrājya* first made an appearance in Sanskrit texts. Amazons, *a-mazon*, literally 'without a breast', were said to have cut off a breast to keep it from getting in the way when they drew back their bow strings (ancient Greeks drew back the bowstring to their chests, rather than their ears). The Amazons were accomplished warriors and were credited with being the first to use cavalry. There are many legends describing how eminent Greek gods and heroes including Dionysus, Theseus, Heracles, Achilles and, much later, according to the Alexander romances, Alexander himself fought against various Amazon queens. In the Amazon kingdom described by the Greeks men performed all the household tasks while women governed and fought; the arms and legs of all male children were broken to make them incapable of war. Thus though there were males amongst

the Amazons, they were kept at home where they belonged. (Graves 1955: 352–325 et passim.)

Two Sanskrit texts contain clear references to Amazon kingdoms, the *Rājataraṅginī* of Kalhaṇa written in 1149/50 and the *Jaimini-aśvamedhaparvan*, a South Indian devotional work written around the same time; in other words both texts appeared at least five centuries after the *strīrājya* was first mentioned in Sanskrit literature. Many scholars see a connection between these Indian accounts of Amazons and those in Greek and Chinese sources. David Gordon White writes that the Central Asian Amazons[9] in all three literatures and European literatures as well are associated with a race of 'dog-men' or 'dog-faces' (*śvamukhas*) who are their husbands. He notes that Chinese references to the Suvarṇagotra, 'Golden Race' associated with the Amazons located in Khotan, north of Kashmir in the same general area where the *Rājataraṅginī* locates its *strīrājya*. (White 1991: 122.) J. Duncan M. Derrett sees a connection between the account of the horse sacrifice in the *Jaimini-aśvamedhaparvan* and the Alexander romances describing the Indian adventures of Alexander and his famous horse Boucephalos. Derrett sees many similar episodes in the two works, not least of which are visits to an amazonian *strīrājya*. "It seems", he writes, "that we have in the JA [*Jaimini-aśvamedhaparvan*] a conflation of the AR [Alexander romance] episodes of Kandake and the Amazons." Though the *strīrājya* is mentioned in earlier Sanskrit works, "only the JA gives lively information about the inhabitants of that place, and the author obviously has it from an AR source". (Derrett 1970: 29–30.)

There are several short passages in the fourth book of the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* which deal with the *strīrājya*. Kalhaṇa describes the *digvijaya* of the 8th-century Kashmiri king Lalitāditya, during which he arrived at the borders of the *strīrājya*. There, the poet says,

> *tad yodhān vigaladdhairyān strīrājye strīno 'karot |*
> *tuṅgau stanau puraskṛtya na tu kumbhau kavāṭinām ||*
> *strīrājyadevyās tasyāgre vīkṣya kampādivikriyām |*
> *saṃtrāsābhilāṣaṃ vā niścikāya na kañcana ||*
>
> The women of Strīrājya frightened his soldiers not by displaying
> the frontal lobes of their elephants but their upright breasts.
> The king saw that the queen of Strīrājya was trembling,
> but he did not know whether it was from fear or desire.
> (RT 4.173–174.)

Commenting on this passage, David Gordon White writes,

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9 The Greeks had first placed the Amazon kingdom on the shores of the Black Sea, but once this area become known, it became necessary to move it further and further back into the recesses of Central Asia.

> Kalhaṇa makes a number of references to the women warriors of the northern kingdom of Strīrājya. While he offers little more than a glimpse of their breasts, his emphasis on this element to the exclusion of all others, may also betray a familiarity with a more universal Amazon (One-Breasted) tradition. (White 1991: 119.)

This is doubtful; since the poet only devotes two verses to the Amazons, he hardly has space to describe much else and, as any reader of *kāvya* is aware, classical poets rarely overlook this part of female anatomy.

Later Kalhaṇa also tells us that

> *cittraṃ jitavatas tasya strīrājye maṇḍalaṃ mahat |*
> *indriyagrāmavijayaṃ bhavamanyanta bhūbhuja ||*
>
> [though] King Lalitāditya conquered a large part of the marvelous kingdom of women (?), [other] kings thought more highly of his victory over his senses (RT 4.587).

The poet adds a few more unhelpful details, telling us that Lalitāditya took away the 'splendid cloth of Karṇa', *karṇaśrīpāṭa*, from the kingdom of women (RT 4.588), though it is unclear what this is, and that he set up an image of Nṛhari, i.e. Viṣṇu, there by suspending it between two magnets (RT 4.158). Elsewhere he remarks that a later Kashmiri king, the lecherous Jayāpīḍa, who also conquered Strīrājya, was a fool for having left it (RT 4.666).

The itinerary of Lalitāditya to the land of women is not too clear. If we try to connect the dots, Lalitāditya apparently goes from Kashmir to the Kāmbojas of eastern Afghanistan, then frightens the Tuḥkhārās, apparently the Tokharians, defeats Mummuni, an unknown ruler, causes concern to the Bhauṭṭas, i.e. Tibetans, and the Daradas (presumably of Dardistan), passes by a deserted Pragjotiṣa, travels through a sea of sand, *bālukāmbudhi*, perhaps the deserts of East Turkestan, and then arrives at the kingdom of women.[10] Since the king passes through Assam it seems that he circles north of the Himalayas or goes through Nepal and thus the *strīrājya* is located northeast of India rather than northwest of it. Kalhaṇa's geography, however, is far from clear. What he tells us can be summed up as follows: Lalitāditya conquered the Amazon kingdom or part of it; he took away the *karṇaśrīpāṭa* from it (whatever it may have been) and erected an image of Hari there; later another Kashmiri king, Jayāpīḍa, conquered the *strīrājya* once more; it may be located in Northeast India. One thing is clear however: Kalhaṇa thinks the *strīrājya* is good for a laugh: first he turns out a humorous simile comparing female breasts and the frontal lobes of elephants, then he makes a mocking remark about the lustful Jayāpīḍa.

A far more detailed description of the kingdom appears in the *Jaimini-aśvamedhaparvan* where we are told that Arjuna and his army followed the sac-

10 For these identifications see the relevant notes in Stein 1900.

rificial horse into the *strīrājya* where it was seized by Pramilā, the queen of the Amazons. The anonymous poet describes this strange country as follows:

tato daivavaśāj jātaḥ punaḥ sa turago yayau |
nānāvidhāṃs tato deśān strīmayān surasān api ||
striyaś ca santi gahanāḥ surūpā navayauvanāḥ |
rājyaṃ nārī ca kurute na pumāṃs tatra jīvati ||
yas tāsāṃ saṃgatiṃ kuryad rūpalāvaṇamohitaḥ |
mukhavāsena ramyeṇa nayanāñcalatāḍitaḥ ||
gītenātha ca nṛtyena hāsyena mṛdubhāṣitaiḥ |
māsamātraṃ striyaṃ prāpya paścāt prāpnoti vaiśasam ||
rataṃ samataraṃ kṛtvā viṣamaṃ daṃśanaṃ punaḥ |
nakhaprahāraiḥ vividhair hā hatāsmīti bhāṣaṇaiḥ ||
tāḍanair muṣṭighātaiś ca grahaṇair mukhacumbanaiḥ |
jihvāghātena samadaṃ kūjitaiḥ pakṣisaṃnibhaiḥ ||
vandanair vīkṣaṇair vakrais tava dāsīti bhāṣaṇaiḥ |
āgato'si gataś cāsi tvayā kānyā smṛtādhunā ||
jananī tava kā prāptā bhaginī gaccha madgṛhāt |
bhāvalābhena sahitaḥ saṃjāto vada suvrata ||
evaṃvidhair vacobhis tāḥ kurvanti gatajīvitam |
tenaiva svena liṅgena praviśanti hutāśanam ||
kācij jīvati sā garbhaṃ dhatte kanyāṃ prasūyate |
praviṣṭas turagaḥ pārtho vīraiḥ pañcabhir āvṛtāḥ ||[11]

Then, impelled by fate, the horse went to many countries,
including the wonderful land of women.
Only women were found there, very beautiful and in the
first bloom of youth.
Women rule in the country and no man dwells there.
Men who are captivated by their beauty go to them,
overwhelmed by the perfume of their mouths
and the charm of their eyes.
He who is overwhelmed by soft words, smiles and dancing
goes to his doom only a month after he gets such a woman.
Having made love most smoothly and with love-bites,
with various fingernail-scratches and [cries of] "Oh, I am slain!"
with blows of fists and embracing and kissing,

11 JA 21.83–92. Petteri Koskikallio and Christophe Vielle are now preparing a critical edition of the *Jaimini-aśvamedhaparvan*; the reconstructed passage reproduced here was kindly sent to me by Petteri Koskikallio; he also made suggestions for the translation.

and tongue-lashing, passionate with bird-like cooing
with praises and side-glances and words like, "I am your slave,
but you just come and go" and
"who is that other girl you are thinking about right now?,
who is your mother (?!), is it your sister you are meeting?
Go away from me!
Oh you well-behaved one, tell me
if you were really born with a good character".
With words like this they make a man lifeless,
he enters the fire because of his own penis / sexual desire(?)
A woman remains alive (?) (if?)
she has conceived and gives birth to a girl (?).
O Pārtha, the horse, surrounded by five heroes entered
[this country].

Unfortunately the last several verses, which are the most interesting, are muddled and it is not quite clear what the poet is trying to say. However we are told that there are no permanent male inhabitants in *strīrājya*; a male can only survive a month there but that their deaths are apparently due to amatory overexertion, though here too we may have an element of humorous exaggeration. According to medieval Bengali renderings of the *Jaimini-aśvamedhaparvan*,[12] men die there because of the "nature (*guṇa*) of the place" and thus it inherently is fatal to males and presumably any male offspring as well. Although this is not a feature of the Greek Amazon kingdom, where men live in subordinate positions, a country where men cannot survive is familiar motif in Chinese accounts. Early Chinese texts speak of a land beyond the seas where all male children died by the age of three (Pelliot 1963: 675) and of another located on an island northwest of Syria where male children were simply killed (Jay 1996: 222).

After the *Jaimini-aśvamedhaparvan* introduces us to the land of the Amazons with this passage, it describes a martial confrontation or near confrontation between Arjuna and Pramilā but just as the two square off and exchange a few arrows,[13] a celestial voice (*nabhavāṇī*) commands them to cease fighting and Pramilā to marry the invader. She submits without a murmur and goes to Hastināpura where she waits to become Arjuna's bride since he has to remain celibate during the course of the horse sacrifice.

It is difficult to make much out of this flimsy anecdote. It is not really a story, since little actually happens. Once the stage is set and the action is about to begin, it

12 For these see Smith 1999.

13 Pramilā uses a bow just like the Greek Amazons, but so does almost every other warrior in classical Indian literature.

is abruptly called off by a heavenly voice and Arjuna goes on his way. It is this very lack of a story that makes the episode odd, or, to put it another way, un-Indian. The Indian narrative imagination possesses an astonishing fertility as can be seen in the way in which stories such as those in the epics and *purāṇas* steadily grew and elaborated themselves over the centuries. If we are to suppose that it actually is an Amazon kingdom which is referred to in the *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* and other early texts, this would mean that for century after century Indian storytellers found the notion of a land of women warriors so uninteresting or repellent, that they declined to make narrative use of it; then once two Sanskrit texts finally give minimal attention to the theme, it disappears and is never heard of again. The contrast to the other themes is striking. The story of the kingdom of *yoginīs*, first definitely attested in the 15th-century play of Vidyāpati, soon found its way into Bengali Nātha lore, Sikh hagiography, Rajasthani retellings of the Gopī Nātha theme and the Lorik epic among other works. The story of the island of the *rākṣasīs* spread all over Asia.

The fact that the Amazon theme proved to be so sterile in India indicates that it is probably not an Indian theme at all. There are other fabulous races in the north briefly mentioned in a few Sanskrit texts, such as the monopodes (*ekapādas*), the basket-ears (*sūrpakarṇas*) and others and they also seem to have come from the outside (Karttunen 1989: 196). The notion of an Amazon kingdom could have been taken from the Greeks, but since the Indian texts say so little about it, there is no way to tell. It could just as well have been suggested by Chinese or other Asian sources.

These three concepts of women's kingdoms in Indian literature, despite their different characters, are basically very much alike since they are projections of identical male presumptions and fears. Since it was presumed that women were essentially licentious, if a land were exclusively inhabited by women, they would be sexual predators since they were no longer under male control. Though the *rākṣasīs* of Tāmradvīpa may devour shipwrecked travelers, they only do this after they are tired of pleasuring themselves with them; the sixteen hundred women of Kadalī steadily drain Mīnanātha of his sexual energy, and the witches who transform travelers into sheep or parrots have other uses in mind for them rather than simply keeping them as pets. Finally, in their descriptions of the Amazon kingdom, the poets are far more interested in the erotic than the military side of the subject. In Kalhaṇa the queen of *strīrājya* is trembling with lust at the sight of her male visitors, while the author of the *Jaimini-aśvamedhaparvan* devotes far more verses to the sexual behavior of the Amazons than their military prowess. The preoccupation with the erotic, obviously, was something from which the Indian narrative imagination had the greatest difficulty in freeing itself.

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