

Jewish women of Cochin, and give their texts and performance settings. These songs (*ḡattu*) in Malayalam embody part of the unique heritage of the Jews of Kerala and recount historical events, such as the fleeing from Kodungallur and the building of synagogues, and retell biblical stories remembered on holy days and at weddings.

Barbara Johnson carefully preserves Ruby's autonomy as narrator, which enables the reader to get a substantial feeling for Ruby's personality. Ruby relates some memories, such as her ability to talk at ten months and that she was the favorite student of her teacher, with quite a childlike enthusiasm. In other places, it is apparent that Ruby misunderstood aspects of the habits and customs of other caste communities or religious groups in Kerala society, for example, the *sambandham* relationship in the matrilineal system of the Nayers (one of the main Hindu castes of Kerala) and the rules that dictated the caste status of the lovers that Nayar women were permitted to take. Johnson often leaves Ruby's social stereotypes to speak for themselves, but informative footnotes outside Ruby's narrative provide a "meta-structure" to contextualize Ruby's personal memories within broader documentary evidence. Johnson is able to clarify historical settings without detracting from the sense that Ruby is in control of the telling of her story. Ruby comes across as very intelligent, strong-willed, and charming. This is a book rich in cultural anecdotes and descriptions of ritual celebrations as remembered by a woman of the Cochin Jewish community. As Ruby herself said, it "is a Cochin cake full of secret goodies," and it is a great contribution to the literature on the diverse lives of Jewish women and the religious communities of Kerala.

M. J. GENTES
Austin, Texas

Water and Womanhood: Religious Meanings of Rivers in Maharashtra. By ANNE FELDHAUS. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995. viii, 250 pp. \$49.00 (cloth); \$18.95 (paper).

Rivers in South Asia play a crucial role in the religious culture of the subcontinent. Rivers are places where water meets underworld, earth, and sky. In auspicious times rivers feed the landscape and its inhabitants, and they may give too much or too little water in floods and droughts. They are demonstrable sites of the circulatory system of the world, and they serve as appropriate locations for moments of crossing in the cycles of life and death. Their waters have the capacity to dissolve sin in gods and humans, especially sins of physical and sexual violation. These many dimensions of the cultural meanings of rivers have existed in one way or another in India as far back as there are traces. And, most importantly for the book under review, rivers have sacred qualities, and they have gender: they are female.

In her new book, *Water and Womanhood*, historian of religions and scholar of Maharashtrian literature and culture Anne Feldhaus has brought many of these connections together in a rich mixture of textual study, ethnography of religion, and analysis of sacred symbols. Maharashtra, a part of India that has not enjoyed the level of scholarly patronage that some others have, receives welcome attention in this volume. Maharashtra, for Feldhaus, is more than a geographical locale—a topos—with the major river systems of the Tapti, Bhima, and Krishna, and tributaries such as the Mula, Mutha, Karha, Nira, and Purna. It is also an imagined place—a mythos—where gods and goddesses and forces engage human life. Feldhaus's inquiry works with exemplary subtlety at the intersections of these two locales. In terms of her

approach she also works at intersections, this time between textual and ethnographic study. She has gathered together a genre of textual sources in Marathi, *mahatmyas*, that celebrate the sacred powers of rivers and the places along them where events of primordial significance took place that still command the attention of the faithful. She also went to these places and talked to the people, all kinds of people from priests to villagers, men and women—especially women. She brings all their voices into our hearing.

The book begins with an exploration of the connection between Maharashtra's rivers and the mythologies of Shiva, particularly those narratives of the descent of the Ganges. For rituals that take place at particular sites along their banks, ritual and myth are linked through an analysis of the architecture of shrines. Her analysis then moves to the gendered character of rivers as feminine, especially around the theme of fecundity. The fecundity of rivers at the topological level connects with the presences of goddesses—auspiciously married but without husbands who have any significant identity of their own—at the divine level, women at the human level, and cows on the animal planes.

In the third chapter the book develops the notion of abundance as the chief characteristic of goddesses, rivers, and auspicious women. Many stories, both textual and oral, give testimony to the miraculous events of healing and wealth-giving that have come from the deep pools within the rivers. The ritual expressions of these mythic times are the many forms of feeding the gods, ancestors, and humans that take place on festival occasions among the communities who gather at the rivers. Feldhaus stresses that the river divinities are at neither polarity of fully giving (Lakshmi type) or fully punitive (Durga type), but somewhere between, in the intimate relationship with the lives of their devotees. The fourth chapter presses the theme of abundance in the direction of the untamed, the forests and wilderness from which rivers emerge, and the large fish that live in the rivers and are understood to belong to the gods and, therefore, are not to be eaten. They live in the water pools in the rivers, and like the anthills in tales of South India, connect the surface with the subsurface worlds within the cosmos as a whole. The *mahatmya* stories link the sources of the rivers with the epic stories of exile, especially of Rama and the Pandavas; forest narratives focus on the course of the river and the animals that, in turn, connect the wilderness of the forest with the fecundity associated with rivers and the feminine.

Chapter 5 narrates poignantly the relationship of rivers to “sons and sorrow”—the longing for children and coping with their absence, either through infertility or death. Rivers/goddesses, therefore, become the sites of vows surrounding progeny. Sons are brought to the rivers for bathing, haircutting, and presentation to the goddesses. The book closes with examinations of modern river festivals, largely dominated by Brahmins, drawing contrasts with folk traditions enumerated earlier in the book. Festivals reflect Brahmin hegemony and serve some functions of civic inclusion at the level of ideology, while in practice they maintain certain traditional hierarchies. Feldhaus gives particular attention to the temple town at Wai, often viewed as the Kashi (Banaras) of Maharashtra, in the context of these dynamics.

Feldhaus's book exemplifies the best in contemporary history of religions scholarship on India. In foregrounding the religious character of Maharashtra's rivers, she demonstrates how Hindu culture circulates. Vedic, epic, puranic, regional, local, men's, and women's traditions flow in and out of one another through currents, cross-currents, and eddies. Through her eyes we see how embodied Hindu reality is, in its complex, gendered, and generative capacities.

PAUL B. COURTRIGHT
Emory University