

Book reviews

Devare, H. (2015). *Ganga to Mekong: A Cultural Voyage through Textiles*. Singapore: Manohar/ ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.

The intimate relationship between women and textiles is no surprise; however the bond between Hema Devare and the art of cloth weaving goes far beyond. Having the privilege of traveling to many places around the world and Asia in particular, Devare has had opportunities to observe differences and similarities of clothing culture. She eventually was able to decipher the trace of cultural connection between her native country, India, and Southeast Asia—the plateaus of two great rivers, the Ganga and the Mekong. What is very intriguing about this connection is that it still shows and shines in its unique form, requiring only very keen eyes to be able to spot it.

Different from other sorts of belongings, textiles were more universal and mobile, which easily allowed them to transmit cultures. They have been the media through which messages and influences from one culture were sent to another. It is not only the style on a piece of cloth that tells stories, but the way that it was made (the number of strings, dyeing and weaving technique) and the way it was used (when and how it was used, and who used it). For example, the social hierarchy of people in both India and Southeast Asia is well reflected in the hierarchy of clothing and textiles in the two cultures.

Following each line and chapter, one can see how exhaustively the author collects evidence from which she meticulously interprets and draws conclusions. Besides observing what people of these two cultures are still wearing nowadays, the author attentively notices old photos, ancient paintings, murals, and even historical manuscripts such as religious writings, folktales, and literature. When the story of Gautama Buddha describes the dress of Amrapali, a renowned courtesan, as a “...richly woven semi-transparent sari”, the author takes the hint of the weaving techniques in the ancient time. In this book the history of trade between the two areas as well as the roles subsequently played by Western colonizers greatly explains how the cultures of the two areas were exchanged and even how it diffused to the Western hemisphere.

Devare was right when she described a feeling of *déjà vu* she had when she traveled and saw what the people of Southeast Asia wore, in reality or in photos and paintings. Every string of cotton, silk, and even silver and gold, and every pattern showing off on these pieces of cloth tells how closely these two cultures have been interwoven.

*Bhubate Samutachak*¹

¹Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, Thailand. Email: bhubate.sam@mahidol.ac.th