

the second edition and in its place we find 41 pages of “Sources”, connected to the text by superscript numbers as if they were notes from which the text was crafted. These are the “primary sources” of the material described at the point where the superscript number occurs in the text but there is no evidence that they were consulted by the author. There are statements in quotation marks scattered through the text which have no superscript number associated with them and for which no source is identified. I suspect I could, if pressed, identify the majority of the secondary sources from which the new material in the texts is constructed but they are not to be found in the “Sources”. I can only assume that the “Sources” were superadded from one of the excellent bibliographies of surgery available—perhaps Garrison-Morton, listed in the bibliography of the earlier addition.

In addition to the historiographic limitations of the critical apparatus, the book is a chronicle of contributions to surgical progress. It does not deal with the issues of patient autonomy and social justice now recognized as a critical component of the medical profession’s social contract as well as being the heart and soul of the important questions of the new social history which has had a profound impact on the field since the 1960s. How did these contributions become widely available while assuring quality care? How was access to the advance made possible? How was competence adjudicated? What was the professional responsibility of these innovators? are among the questions which cry out for discussion in these stories, but they cry out in vain. There are occasional lapses of judgment, where the writing outruns the data, e.g., Pasteur “discovered bacteria” and Halsted “introduced” the surgical residency, but on the whole the book is as accurate as the existing secondary sources. Richardson faithfully tells the stories he has chosen to tell. I still enjoyed the read, the stories are the ones loved by my surgical colleagues and as heritage they cannot hurt anyone; but as history they are too limited to help anyone.

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**Rahul Peter Das,** *The origin of the life of a human being: conception and the female according to ancient Indian medical and sexological literature*, Indian Medical Tradition, vol. 6, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 2003, pp. xvi, 728, Rs. 1250 (hardback 81-208-1998-5).

In *The origin of the life of a human being*, Rahul Peter Das explores the fascinating subjects of conception, anatomy, and female “seed” in the Sanskrit medical corpus and in later related texts. A scholarly study that is certainly the only one of its kind, Das lays out for us a vast and staggeringly exhaustive array of materials ordered in quasi-chronological fashion, beginning with the *Carakasamhitā* (circa early to mid-second century CE) and ending with a sampling of materials from later Sanskrit “sexological” works.

First of all, I am utterly mystified by this book’s title, which is, I suspect, a “hedge” on the part of its publishers, who have had a recent spate of trouble with right-wing Hindus, and who have perhaps chosen such a title in order to mask the actual subject matter of the book, which is not about religious or philosophical formulations on the origins of human life and its “mysteries,” as the main title suggests, but is chiefly about female orgasm, ejaculation, and anatomy. The book has an identifiable “subject,” but there is no narrative or visible line of argument anywhere to be found, nor is there an attempt by the author to provide any sort of cultural context or framework for this material.

Das’s writing style is also unnecessarily verbose and obfuscatory. He rightly criticizes the importation of inappropriate terms from western medicine in existing translations and discussions of classical Indian medicine, but the book is not helped in any way by his jarring, distasteful, and juvenile criticisms of other scholars. Although Das has done a phenomenal amount of research, he has presented the material with very little imagination and in a way that is of little use to his readers. The volume is unwieldy, and the writing is inelegant, undisciplined, and profoundly difficult to follow or even to assess. Nothing is tightly or crisply reasoned, and the book is instead bursting with tangential discussions and

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equivocations, basically presenting its readers with piles of questions for which the author offers very few answers. Das's prose loosens up somewhat in the second half of the book, but it is at this point that the writing becomes disturbingly prurient in places, especially in the footnotes. This is not a book about women, but only about their parts. The main body of the book is really only of use to other philologists, and only then if they are invested in the subject and interested in the hair-splitting distinctions in which Das takes great delight.

The book is not without its merits or uses, however. In chapter five, Das explains some very interesting passages on uterine receptivity and the problem of "fecund blood" versus regular "menstrual blood" that riddles many discussions of conception in a variety of early Sanskrit genres. His multiple chapters on the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*, a medical compendium that can be dated to the third century CE, contain some useful and substantive discussions on the nature of female procreative substances and anatomical ducts. His discussion in Appendix I of the relations of Indian medicine with Greek and Yūnānī medical systems is one of the most intelligent I have seen. The glossary found at the

back of the book is also excellent and is perhaps the book's most useful aspect.

Ultimately, this is an indispensable but very difficult and idiosyncratic study. I would guide readers to Das's conclusion first. If readers are then interested in the specifics of how Das arrived at his concluding summaries, and if they have the patience for it, they can then refer to the material in the preceding chapters, which are luckily coded by chapter and paragraph number in the conclusion itself.

The book is overly ambitious, and if Das had worked on a smaller scale and had written more expansively on individual problems, the material would be much more accessible. With keen editing, the entire volume could have been half its length—it is mostly weighed down by Das's excessively chatty and unreadable verbiage. Had Das designed the book around its glossary rather than tacking it on at its end as an appendix, the entire volume would have been much more successful and more useful as a reference.

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