

**Kesavan Veluthat and Donald R. Davis, Jr. (Ed.) *Irreverent History. Essays in Honour of M.G.S. Narayanan.* Delhi: Primus Books. 2014, 328pp, ISBN: 978-93-84082-14-7—Reviewed by Lidia Sudyka (Jagiellonian University)**

The book felicitating Professor M.G.S. Narayanan, an eminent historian whose works proved to be a breakthrough in research on Kerala's past, opens with the presentation of this scholar—'irreverent historian' as Kesavan Velluthat, the author of the essay and another brilliant historian, calls him. Muttayil Govindamenon Sankara Narayanan (b. 1932) has never treated an inherited set of data as the only possible arrangement of pieces of information. He has been able to put the right questions and logically interpret the collected material. Such an attitude was extremely important because till the middle of the twentieth century the legends and historical facts were in fact mixed up together in the process of retrieving the past of Kerala. M.G.S. Narayanan has learned ancient scripts such as *vatteluttu*, *koleluttu* and *grantha* as well as the Tamil language, Sanskrit and old Malayalam. Thus, he was well equipped to analyse the inscriptions, not reducing his studies to those published so far. He travelled extensively throughout Kerala and cross-checked the stone inscriptions *in situ*. He was able to make corrections in already published inscriptions and discover some new ones.

To celebrate 'the irreverent historian', Kesavan Veluthat and Donald R. Davies Jr. edited 15 papers in order to create 'irreverent

history'. Six essays form the first part devoted to culture and history of Kerala (Part I. Kerala History and Culture, pp. 15–144). The collected articles deepen and expand essentially that area of research which is of utmost importance for M.G.S. Narayanan.

Christophe Vielle in his article *How did Paraśurāma Come to Rise Kerala* (pp. 15–32) analyses different textual sources in order to show the process of construction of *keraladeśam*'s legendary origins as connected with the figure of Rāma Jāmadagnya. The extant literary texts and epigraphical evidence, if studied carefully, reveal the role of Keralan commentators of Sanskrit texts and authors of *praśastis* in this gradual process of tying up the Paraśurāma story with Kerala. Christopher Vielle, aptly guiding the readers through Sanskrit, Tamil and Malayalam texts, allows them to understand the mechanisms of growth of this tradition throughout the centuries.

K. N. Ganesh's choice was to contribute to the subject of *svarūpam*—an important political institution, whose formation as well as political and economic functions he attempted to describe in his article *From Nadu to Swarupam: Political Authority in Southern Kerala from the Tenth to the Thirteenth Centuries* (pp. 13–52). His research concentrates on Vēṅṅāṭṭu. In this way his thorough study complements not only the understanding of the transition from one formation to another, but also our knowledge of the history of Vēṅṅāṭṭu, a region which still requires a lot of consideration and clarifications of certain misunderstandings. Though the article refers to a particular region and addresses Kīlpēruṟ or Trippāppūr *svarūpams* connected with its history, the processes shown by the author provide a basis for the understanding of the same changes in other parts of Kerala.

In the article *Changes in Land Relations during the Decline of the Cēra State* (pp. 53–79), its author Manu V. Devadan questions the tendency to consider the three centuries of Cēra rule as a monolithic whole. Devadan using inscriptional material shows that “there was an enormous difference in the nature of landholding between the 9<sup>th</sup> century when records began to speak of a Cēra state for the first time and the early 12<sup>th</sup> century when the state collapsed” (p. 73).

The size of individual holdings decreased, while the ranks of landholders and the level of fiscal control increased meaningfully. That was the reason, according to Devadan, that there was no chance for any single line of chiefs to exercise control over the whole land of Kerala. As he concludes, the mythical last ruler Cēramān Perumāḷ had to abdicate and go on a pilgrimage. With this metaphor he finishes his investigations in this intriguing subject.

The next two articles *Jaṭāyuvadhāṃ in Kerla's Sanskrit Theatre Kūṭiyāṭṭām* (pp. 81–92) and *Satire as Apology: The Puruṣārthakkūṭṭū of Kerala* (pp. 93–109) address the issues connected with the culture of Kerala, namely its theatrical traditions. The *kūṭiyāṭṭām* play *Jaṭāyuvadhāṃ* or *The Slaying of Jāṭayu* (the fourth act of Śaktibhadra's play *Āścaryacūḍāmāṇi*) is introduced by Heike Moser, a scholar and *kūṭiyāṭṭām* practitioner herself, as an example of a living tradition which, while preserving its essential features, transforms in order to become suitable for new audiences.

Donald R. Davis, Jr. explores the *Puruṣārthakkūṭṭū*, an example of *cākyārkkūṭṭū*, a subgenre of *kūṭiyāṭṭām*. It satirizes the Hindu religious categories known as 'aims of human pursuits'. Donald Davis Jr. refers to different views on satire and its effects. He brings Northrop Frye, Peter Berger and Dustin Griffith's opinions. In conclusion he states that although the *cākyārkkūṭṭū* draws upon the hypocrisy and other imperfections of human nature, it "is predestined in a way that limits the possibilities for real criticism, whether religious or political in nature." (p. 105) In other words the performer laughs at the people but does not try to reform their behaviour. As to the *Puruṣārthakkūṭṭū*, "it tends not to promote the pursuit of classical 'aims', but rather to excuse the inevitable discrepancy between word and deed in religion" (p. 105).

In the article *Implications of the Ritual Programme and Context of Ārāṭṭupuḷa Pūram* (pp. 111–144) closing the first part of the felicitation volume connected with Kerala, which in many cases builds upon M.G.S. Narayanan's research, Rich Freeman displays before the reader one of the colourful temple festivals of Kerala, namely Ārāṭṭupuḷa Pūram. However, one is given not only ritual itinerary with

many intriguing details but the Pūram festival is set in historical and geographical context. It turns out that in the complicated net of links and reliance the role of the huge Peruvanam Temple is minor in comparison to the small nearby temple of Ārāṭṭupula. Peruvanam as is well known is one of the 32 brāhmaṇa settlements (grāmam) which according to the believes were established by Paraśurāma, the mythical creator of Kerala. A close look at the ritual order and mutual relationships with other temples may bring such an orchestration, to use Freeman's words, that the executive centre is not needed and, according to the author, "it may suggest a different way of thinking about the long presence of Peruvanam in relation to the rest of the temples and constituencies in its region".

Part II entitled *Epigraphy, Connected History, and Conceptual Frameworks* comprises of nine research papers, each of them opening new possibilities for further discussion and investigations.

Krishna Mohan Shrimali reflecting on economic history of early India underlines a need to define "the grammar and syntax of certain conceptual parameters of 'economic' histories". In his article "Social Structure and Commercial Pursuits in Early India" (pp. 147–166) he speaks about such issues as production, categories of agriculture- and non-agriculture-based producers, medium of exchange, markets as a social construct, notions of 'progress' and 'growth', agents of social change, the role of the state and finally society impacting arts and culture.

Daud Ali's essay *The Image of the Scribe in Early Medieval Sources* (pp. 167–187) touches on many interesting points in order to make a figure of a scribe recognisable as a participant in social and political life of medieval India. The scribal groups in the Gupta and post-Guta times most probably were composed of members of different social and ethnic origin. Later on the service became hereditary and "by the tenth century various scribal lineages crystallized into a number of apparently endogamous groups which later came to be understood as part of distinctive caste and subcaste identities" (p. 171). The focus of the second part of the article is on the works

of Kṣemedra depicting the scribe as villain and the anthologies from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries constituting this topos. Daud Ali explains convincingly such a shift in the image of scribe, although as he adds, further studies on the subject are required. A selection of verses on scribes from anthologies accompanies this gripping article. In the bibliography a spelling mistake changed the sex of the editor and translator of Kṣemendra's *Narmamālā*—it is Fabrizia Baldissera, not Fabrizio!

The article *Community, Caste and Region in Odisha: The Formative Period* (pp. 189–203) by Bhairabi Prasad Sahu again addresses regional issues. The region known today as Odisha was constituted by gradual coming-together of different subregions and localities. The processes of peasantization of forest tribes, differentiation of castes as well as transformation of folk deities led to kingship and state formation during early medieval and medieval times. As Bhairabi Prasad Sahu underlines: “Constitution of authority did not mean homogenization of beliefs and practices, but the organization and accommodation of the variety and difference” (p. 197), which still can be observed. Sanskrit terms are sometimes given in IAST but mainly they appear without proper diacritics. It is particularly astonishing when among the enumeration of different terms written without diacritics one is given in IAST. The same trait can be observed in the article *Historical Memory and Statecraft in Late Medieval South India: A Study of Krishnadeva Raya's Campaign of AD 1517* by Venkata Raghotham (pp. 261–276).

Upinder Singh in her article *Varṇa and Jāti in Ancient India: Some Questions* (pp. 208–214) notices that the academic discourse on caste, although lively, practically does not touch on the ancient and medieval time. She shows that this complex issue needs to be investigated thoroughly. She refers to the *Dharmaśāstra* tradition, *Lekhapaddhati* and inscriptions, emphasizing that “the epigraphic discourse on *varṇa* and *jāti* emanating from political elites is very uneven in terms of specific content, and this suggests the unevenness of development of social institutions in different parts of the subcontinent” (p. 212). As there were several sources of authority and legitimacy in ancient societies,

the extent to which these two categories were accepted and contested should be reconsidered as well as the reasons for the spread of the *jāti* system through the subcontinent.

The brilliant contribution *Borrowed Words in an Ocean of Objects: Geniza Sources and New Cultural Histories of the Indian Ocean* (pp. 215–242) shows that the historical linguistics can be an extremely exciting adventure. The paper is not only about the words travelling through cultures but also about the complicated life-story of the objects. Its authoress Elizabeth Lambourn exploits the so-called ‘India Book’, i.e. the documents such as letters and legal documents relating to the medieval Indian Ocean trade and belonging to Cairo Geniza materials. She focuses on two nouns—*tālam* and *fātiya*—which can be found in the correspondence of one of the famous by now Geniza’s India traders, namely Abraham Ben Yiju. These two Indic loanwords prove that there was an interaction between medieval Arabic of the western Indian Ocean area and different Indian languages. In the case of the above-mentioned loanwords these were Malayalam and Tulu.

Noboru Karashima lists 16 inscriptions from the latter half of the twelfth and the first half of the thirteenth centuries. These are agreements and compacts made by local chieftains in the Tamil country. Karashima provides an English translation of two of them and explains historical implications of their contents. His essay *Political Compacts Made by Local Chiefs during the Later Chola Period* indicates that ex-hill tribes increased their power. They followed Brahmanical ideas as well as their own religious traditions. Under Vijayanagara rules, the local chiefs of tribal origin were held in check and replaced by *nāyakas* from Karnataka or Andhra.

Y. Subbarayalu in his paper entitled *A Copperplate Inscription of Krishnadevaraya’s Time: Its Historical Implication* (pp. 251–260) discusses the inscriptional material belonging to Apparasvāmikaḷmaṭha, also known as Periyānāṭṭu-maṭha, at Tiruvannamalai. This part of the Mackenzie collection was edited by T. N. Subramanian, then by P. R. Srinivasan. Y. Subbarayalu was able to propose a few changes, a very precious contribution, indeed. The inscription mentions that King

Kṛṣṇadevarāya and Sāluva-nāyaka visited the temple and announced the will to erect 1,000-pillard *maṇḍapa* in the first *prākāra*. The pontiff convoked the *periyānāṭṭavar* or a big assembly to discuss the matter and the new location for the *maṭha* was chosen as well as a new supervisor of it was appointed. The record throws light on the relationships between religious institutions and the king as well as it adds to the understanding of *periyānāṭṭavar*, which was a supralocal and multi-ethnic organization still important in political hierarchy.

*Historical Memory and Statecraft in Late Medieval South India: A Study of Krishnadeva Raya's Campaign of AD 1517* is yet another article connected with Kṛṣṇadevarāya's rule. Its author Venkata Raghotham warns against trusting the rethoric of inscriptions issued by the kings of Vijayanagara as they are "essentially a pious mixture of ambition and hope, and rarely do inscriptional records contain simulacra of reality" (p. 263). As an example he gives the narrative of Kṛṣṇadevarāya's campaign against the Gajapati rulers of Orissa. He projects it on a background provided by the memories about the earlier invasion of the Gajapatis in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The last article in this volume transfers us to the North India and the change in space is followed by the change of times. Nayanjot Lahir's *Delhi's Capital Century (1911–2011): Understanding the Transformation of the City* (pp. 277–296) describes the history of the creation of the new city, namely the building of Imperial Delhi and providing the capital with all the institutions and facilities, then the transformation which took place after Partition and finally the last changes in the city landscape. The sentence concluding the essay, a quotation after the senior architect and town planner Kuldeep Singh, expresses anxiety of Nayanjot Lahiri and perhaps many Dilliwallas: 'Known as a "City of Monuments", Delhi in future could well be called the city of "Serpentine Concrete".' (p. 293).

The volume ends with the list of M. G. S. Narayanan's research publications. As a whole, with contributions from Christophe Vielle, K. N. Ganesh, Manu V. Devadevan, Heike Moser, Rich Freeman, Krishna Mohan Shrimali, Daud Ali, Bhairabi Prasad Sahu, Upinder Singh,

Elizabeth Lambourn, Noboru Karashima, Y. Subbarayalu, Venkata Raghotham and Nayanjot Lahiri, it is a valuable source containing articles on Indian history, epigraphy, society and culture. All articles collected here share the same attitude, namely the pursuit of an objective representation of facts and the search for truth.

