

The Indological project has had no dearth of contributions ever since its inception in the colonial period. The forms and the nature of this research have, however, varied. There existed from the latter part of the nineteenth century a very strong tradition of history writing in south India (linked to a larger process in other parts of the country). It derived largely from the Orientalist perception of the country's past, and resurrected past political glory to construct a picture of harmonious progress disrupted in recent times by the advent of the British. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri (1936, 1955), the doyen of this school, transformed the study of south Indian history by his extensive and comprehensive use of epigraphical sources. It is in very recent times that a challenge has been posed to this historiographical trend in the writings of D. N. Jha (1985), Rajan Gurukul (1989, 1993) and R. Champakalakshmi (1986, 1996). The challenge lies more in terms of prioritisation and methodology than in analyses: here, the socio-economic processes underlying the political have been emphasised.

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It is to the late sixties and to one man in particular that one would attribute a reinvigorated interest of the Orientalists in south Indian studies. Burton Stein (1967) laid the epistemic foundations of this school. The essential argument in this and in his subsequent work is that there existed an alliance between brahmanas and rich peasants (*velalas*)—the religious and landed elite, respectively, in the Tamil country in the pre-colonial period—who succeeded in exerting their authority in hundreds of local, territorial segments called *nadus*. The Cola state was accordingly labelled a 'segmentary state' 'in which secular authority was widely distributed over hundreds of nattar' (dominant peasant) groups who 'enjoyed private territorial jurisdiction while recognising the overlordship of the Chola [sic] ruler. The latter was essentially *primus inter pares*—the

REVIEW IN DEPTH

Legitimising Power: The Tyagaraja Cult Mahalakshmi R

The Lord of Arur: The Tyagaraja Cult in Tamilnadu
 A Study in Conflict and Accommodation

by Rajeshwari Ghose

Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996; viii + 414 pp

most powerful nattar of the Tamil region'. Thus the ritual character of Cola sovereignty was over-emphasised, suggesting a dichotomised separation between the 'symbolic' and 'cosmological' structures and the socio-economic ones.

Stein's work played a positive role so far as scholarship on the region south of the Vindhyas was concerned. It generated a fresh spate of writing on the area, in agreement with as well as in criticism of his ideas. Many anthropologists, sociologists and historians working under the rubric of 'ethnohistory', and primarily situated in the western academia, have been influenced by the notion of the existence of segmented authority in pre-colonial south India. Ghose's work raises many questions regarding the validity of such analyses through its focus on the politico-ideological underpinnings that foster the growth of a cult over a long period of historical progression.

Political Symbol

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The central argument in this book is that the Tyagaraja cult with its *locus sanctus* in Tiruvarur was a powerful tool for legitimisation of power at different times. Ghose traces the foundations of the cult from the seventh century AD under the Pallavas, its elaboration and importance through the Cola period, and its resurgence once again in the seventeenth century. The Tyagaraja is iconographically the same as a Somaskanda—the composite image of Siva with Uma and Skanda—a creation of the Pallavas and a symbol par excellence of cultural and religious integration. But iconologi-

cally the two are quite different. Ghose defines the Tyagaraja icon in architectural terms as the *utsavabera* form (the processional image) of the Somaskanda housed in a shrine separate from the main shrine (p. 11). The importance of the Tamil god Murukan has been well documented by Kamil V. Zvelebil (1973). The association of this deity with the Skanda-Karttikeya of Puranic lore and the attribution of divine parentage in the form of Siva and Parvati—the latter being identified as his mother Korravai in the erstwhile tradition—contributed to this creation. In the newly evolved figure of the Somaskanda/Tyagaraja, greater importance was attached to Siva, and it is only with the spread of Tantric and Saktaic beliefs from the fourteenth century that the goddess began to be accorded a higher status (p. 18). Ghose argues:

The Somaskanda was evolved during a time when the process of synthesis between the Sanskrit north and the Tamil south was accelerated under royal patronage Murukan was one of the earliest gods worshipped by the Tamils ... the model of a king ... closely associated with the Tamil land and the Tamil language Many of these characteristics were transferred to Tyagaraja; he was the god of the Tamils, god of the Colas, and god of fertility (pp. 19-20).

But Ghose qualifies that it is only after a long period of evolution that the cultic icon developed in the twelfth century AD with the spread of Tantrism. 'Thus, Tyagaraja, originally a full-blooded anthropocentric representation of Siva, Uma and Skanda, became more and more abstracted and was reduced in essence to a *yantra*' (p. 27).

Ghose traces the origin of the term *Vitanka*, which is used for the Tyagaraja icon and not for the Somaskanda, and studies the traditional seven sacred sites of this cult. She concurs with the idea that the *linga* and the Somaskanda around

which the cult revolves represent the two philosophical inseparables—the *nirguna* and *saguna*, the *sthula* and *sukhma* forms (p. 37). The Sanskrit origin of the term *Vitanka* (one made without a chisel) appears to be a later philosophical interpolation, and Ghose opines that the Tamil devotional poets did not use it in this sense but to connote something beautiful (pp. 30-31). It has, however, been understood in recent times as a *linga* 'made of precious stone and carefully preserved in a silver casket and ritually placed on the right hand side of the Somaskanda to which daily midday... and evening ablutions ... are performed' (p. 30). This is linked to the growing Tantric influences in the region from the twelfth century AD, and *Vitanka* is therefore described as the *kundalini*, while Tiruvarur is known as the *muladhara ksetra*, the central repository of this primal energy (p. 37).

Myth and Reality

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The origin of the Tyagaraja myth is intimately connected with the legendary Cola guardian of the kingdom of Indra (the celestial king in Hindu mythology), Mucukuntan. While the essential story of this guardian warding off demons from the gateway of the heavens is found in the Cankam epic *Cilappatikaram*, the identification of this mortal king with the Cola monarch is made by Atiyarkkunallar, the twelfth century commentator on the text. It is in Ottakkuttar's *Ittiyelupatu* that the foundations of the Tyagaraja myth can be found. This poet was the court-poet of three successive Cola kings, Vikrama Cola (1118-35 AD), Kulottunka II (1133-50 AD), and Rajaraja II (1146-73 AD). The Tyagaraja icon is said to have been brought to earth by the chief of the Cenakuntars (a class of weavers), an ancestor of the poet in the narrative, for the benefit of his master Mucukuntan, closely identified with Kulottunka II (pp. 77-9). While there were other elaborations and variants of this myth, the political implications of this legend are discussed in detail by Ghose. She links this to the necessity arising out of Kulottunka I's accession, who was

of Cola extract only on his maternal side. Thus, it became essential to weave tales of chaos and confusion, followed by peace and harmony heralded by this new line of kings. Ghose makes here an impressive contribution to south Indian history and it would probably be necessary for the reader to flit between chapters 4 and 9 to get a feel of the simultaneous processes of mythmaking and growing political authority and legitimation.

A fascinating feature of the book is that Ghose makes many startling connections through the elaboration of what appears to be tangential information. Thus the motif of the anklet in the dance of Tyagaraja is traced to the Cankam texts as symbolising victory and is studied within the context of its use in cultic dances (p. 98). The fusing of the Vedic and Agamic traditions and privileging the latter over the former in subtle ways forms another interesting part of the study (pp. 135-141, 187). A motif that recurs often is the constant presence of the goddess in the Tyagaraja myths (pp. 27-8, 38, 67, 85, 148). Ghose argues against the historical validity of tales of Sankara taming the fierce goddess, and sees in such myths an expression of the impact of the Advaitic doctrine on the Saiva schools (p. 162). The discussion on the *mariyatai* scheme in temple ritual calls for comment as well. The term *mariyatai* literally means respect and is used to connote the ritual status accorded to various functionaries in temple ritual. As Ghose suggests, it was basically a means to diffuse points of social tension through the incorporation of various caste specialists into this scheme, as well as their integration in the religious sense into the Agamic fold (pp. 225-28).

The book makes an important contribution to the study of the history of religion in general as it

attempts to bridge the gap between theory and field research. Hence, Ghose defines 'cult', derived from the Latin '*cultus*', as the constant interweaving of various myths, symbols, rites, festivals and dances which produce a body of ideas and practices resulting in the formation of a group (though not a fixed one) espousing a specific form of the divine (pp. 3-4). In the Hindu tradition, cults are seen as evolving around three factors—the sacred place, the sacred waters and the icon. The Tyagaraja cult is placed by Ghose within the range of regional cults and she broadly uses Victor Turner's paradigmatic approach to study the various tensions arising within cults—'egalitarianism vs. non-egalitarianism', 'exclusiveness vs. inclusiveness', etc (p. 6). But she emphasises on the need to make it relevant to the Hindu-Tamil context by taking into account that very essential component of the social fabric, caste (p. 6). She studies myths as cultural integrators which provide certain practices with a philosophical base and neutralise rival beliefs and practices by emulation and/or persecution (p. 187). Thus, in her analysis of the Tyagaraja image as the focal symbol of the cult performing certain symbolic functions, she qualifies that the symbol is not fixed but keeps acquiring new meanings which appear to be added on 'by collective fiat to old symbol-vehicles', what Turner calls 'processual symbols' (p. 99).

Religious Legitimation

the ritual aspects of sovereignty are in no way divorced from the political and temporal structures of power

While there is much that the book offers, it fails in one fundamental respect—to prove the centrality of the Tyagaraja cult as *the* tool of legitimation for the Colas, particularly from the time of Kulottunka I. As Ghose herself points out, Nataraja or Atavallan was also constantly invoked by the Colas as their presiding deity (pp. 24-25), while the massive edifices at Gangaikondacolapuram and Tanjavur demonstrate the importance given by the rulers to the establishment of a state cult in these temple centres. R. Champakalakshmi (1989a) has shown how in keeping with the *bhakti* tradition hymns were composed in praise of these two newly created royal temples, which were then included in the *Tirumurai* or Saiva canon. The legend of Hiranyavarman in the *Cidambara Mahatmya*, according to Kulke (1993), also parallels the life and times of Kulottunka I, and, as in the Mucukuntan myth, attributes the restoration of peace and order in the period of flux to this legendary figure. Moreover, the importance given to other deities, such as the various goddesses, through grants and the construction of structural shrines from the twelfth century reflects the dynamics of this process of cultural integration. In fact, the Cola period stands apart precisely because of its integration and accommodation of many diverse strands of belief, what Kulke terms the 'horizontal process of legitimation', concomitant with the vertical legitimation of enfolding several strands of belief within the Vedic and Agamic fold.

In methodological terms, the excessive drawing upon the works of Stein's school is disappointing in that Ghose, if not by intention then by compulsion, puts paid to the basic argument of the 'segmentary state' thesis through her constant emphasis on the political processes under-

lying the ideological trajectories of the Cola state, but does not really address the looming historiographical implications. If, as Stein and his followers argue, the *nadu* was really a self-sustaining unit, the abundant epigraphical evidence that points towards the flow of revenue and resources from such units to the Cola state, channelled via the temple's institutional apparatus, would remain inexplicable. Also, as Ghose herself is at pains to stress, the ritual aspects of sovereignty are in no way divorced from the political and temporal structures of power. In fact, chapters 6 to 9 essentially deal with the very crucial intertwining of religious ideology/symbols and political legitimation and power. Despite these problems, Ghose's contribution is noteworthy and will enrich the body of knowledge available on south India.

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LECTURE

Social History at Margins

Ramchandra Guha gave three talks at the IAS, Shimla, in May 1998. In his first lecture, 'Can An Englishman Become Indian: The Case of Verrier Elwin', he began with the provocation that in Indian historiography biographies were never given much importance. Inquiring into Indian social and intellectual history, he argued that the Indian tradition lacked the concept of individuality.

Guha presented an 'intellectual'

biography of Verrier Elwin. He pointed out that due to their philosophical limitations, colonial, nationalist and subaltern historiographers convert various forms of social life into a category, and are unable to see the multiplicity of historical realities of Indian life. As a result, some important British scholars who were successful in establishing intimate relations with the Indian society are left out of their purview, Verrier being one of them.

In his second lecture on 'The Cultural Politics of Sport in British India' Guha talked about the relationship between cricket, colonia-

lism and Indian society. Highlighting the biography of Balwant Baloo, who was born in a dalit family and became a great cricketer, Guha described the political context which surrounded Baloo on the cricket fields of Bombay. Guha stated that even in the case of biographical histories our attention is always drawn towards successful and conspicuous personalities: the bias is implicit in the very act of the selection of subject for biographical study.

The third lecture based on the Indian environment movements stressed on the need for a metho-

dology to establish 'untouched' biographies. Guha talked of many British environmentalists who interacted with the Indian environment in an innovative way.

Ramchandra Guha's lectures encouraged sharp debate. Scholars present in the discussion questioned Guha's remarks on the lack of biographical instinct in the Indian tradition and his views on the Marxists' ignorance of the value of biographies/biographers. They were doubtful about Verrier Elwin's commitment to tribal life, and to the Indian situation in general.

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