

# DISCOURSES ON INDIAN HISTORY

*A Festschrift in Honour of*  
**Professor N. Rajendran**

Editor

**N. Sethuraman**

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**DISCOURSES ON INDIAN HISTORY - A FESTSCHRIFT  
IN HONOUR OF PROFESSOR N. RAJENDRAN**

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## **NOBORU KARASHIMA AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF MEDIEVAL SOUTH INDIA**

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### **I. Introduction**

Most of the attempts to write an accurate version of history often end up as mere subjective exercises. Although many a historians seek to or claim to write history from an objective point of view, consciously or unconsciously, subjectivity creeps in, due to a number of factors. Though researchers might believe that their historical writing is objective, only a critical review of their research at a later context would reveal how subjective their history had been. Historians can control or suppress or highlight or facts, while writing history. The use of certain words and phrases by historians to elaborate a point can reflect or suppress their subjectivity. However, careful and balanced approaches, and systematic and scientific methods can lead to closer to objective perspectives in history. A review of history writing in India from the colonial period reveals that the kind of questions raised by the historians often depends upon the needs of the contemporary society (Thapar 2013). Similarly, historians' context and their ideological orientations determine the nature of history written by them. The late Japanese scholar Noboru Karashima's research is among the few serious and scientific efforts undertaken to reconstruct and comprehend the history of Medieval South India in the post-Independence era. In this paper, I intend to present a brief outline of the contributions of Noboru Karashima to the research on the history of South India.

Before looking into the contribution of Noboru Karashima, I briefly survey the developments related to history writing in South India. Although writing history, in the modern sense of the discipline, was not known in pre-colonial India, people of Indian subcontinent did develop narratives about the past in various forms as evidenced by the

texts of northern part of India (Thapar 2013). The Tamil tradition too has evidence for the history oriented accounts. Tradition (*marabu*) is mentioned in the Tamil grammatical text of *Tolkappiyam* as representing the views of the past; the early medieval Tamil text, *Iraiyanar Agapporul Urai* describes the three Tamil Sangams that were established in antiquity and their chronological details (Zevelbil 1974; Datta 1988: 1744-45). The terms such as *mutur* in Sangam literature, "talkudy" *Velirs* of 49 generations suggest the perceptions about antiquity (Subrahmanian 1988). The *meikirti* portions of Tamil inscriptions, which list the lineage of the kings and the *Periyapuranam*, the medieval hagiographical work, have traces of history writing.

The beginning of documentation of historical sources of India could be traced back to the time of the colonial administrators. Colonel Colin McKenzie made an important pioneering attempt to recover the sources for history of South India. The story of Archaeological Survey of India's professionals, including Eugen Julius Theodor *Hultzsch* and Venkayya, who had made a lot of efforts in recovering the information from the inscriptions, is very important in the historiography of South India. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri in the preface to his work on the Cholas observes "This history of the Cholas, the first systematic study of a great epoch, has been rendered possible only by the work carried on steadily from year to year for half a century by the Archaeological Survey of India" (Nilakanta Sastri 1955: vii).

K.A.N. Sastri made an important and systematic attempt to reconstruct the history of the Cholas. His work on the Cholas was first published in 1937 and it was revised and published later in 1955. K.A.N. Sastri extensively used the information from the inscriptions to reconstruct the history of South India. This work catches up the major patterns of political history. Sastri saw the period of the Cholas as the most creative period of South Indian history". He comments that "In local government, in art, religion and letters, the Tamil country reached heights of excellence never reached again in succeeding ages" (Nilakanta Sastri 1955: vii).

### **Diversity of Approaches to History**

There have always been variations in the approaches to the history of Tamil region adopted by the researchers deriving from Tamil Studies, Marxist schools and historical schools of thoughts and the popular writers and laypersons. The Aryan and Dravidian theories and the Dravidian and Tamil Nationalist movements created Tamil-Sanskrit divide

in the society, from the late nineteenth century, and these movements had greater impact on the popular and academic realms of the Tamil region. Researchers tended to admire the contribution of a specific language or cultural tradition leading to value judgement and conflicts about the history writing.

History and cultural studies have become sites of struggles and contestations from the colonial period. In the context of Indian and Tamil nationalism, portrayal of a glorious past was a necessity, as a response to the intellectual dominance of the colonial discourse. Similarly, the dominance of Sanskrit centered historical and cultural interpretations were also resented, among the sections of the Tamils. As a result, the "Sangam Age" of the pre-Medieval context was seen as an age undisturbed by Brahmanical values, and more importance was given to the Sangam Age and its history, and the Sangam Age has remained closer to the heart of Tamil lovers, who saw an ideal age, with a nostalgic orientation, in the Sangam Age. Because of the popular movements of the early twentieth century, an emotional approach to history has always persisted in Tamil Nadu down to the contemporary times. However, one cannot deny the fact that with the establishment of serious academic departments; historical research was carried out at a few quarters very professionally by native researchers.

#### **Research from "Inside" and "Outside"**

Research on "self" and the "other" are definitely factors influencing the nature of historical research. Studying the "self" (inside) is undertaken often due to the internal needs of the society, the interest of the researchers, and also as a matter of convenience. Studying the "other" is conditioned by several factors, apart from individual interests.

In cultures such as that of the Indians, there is more focus to look inwards rather than outwards; on the contrary, the states and agencies from the western contexts have always integrated the outwards interests, along with the internal interests. Most of the researchers and students of history in the Indian universities undertake studies only on Indian history and culture, and they do not generally look outside, to undertake studies on the US or Europe, with a few exceptions. This trend can be attributed to the nature and orientation of the academic departments and centres, which have been established in the Indian Universities, unlike the external cultures oriented study centres in universities of the Western world. Indian interest in external territories was mainly on Southeast Asia, as Southeast Asian culture and history

were seen as by-products of Indian achievements. In the twentieth century, centres for Southeast Asian Studies were setup at a few centres in India; however, such research centres did not flourish, because of the geo-political conditions of Southeast Asia, and internal dynamics of the Indian society.

Researchers from a particular society approach its history from the position of "our" history, although there are scholars, who are exception to this trend. Native scholars who live in a particular social context are compelled by their own socio-economic formations, consciously or unconsciously. Historical writing by some of the native scholars, who fail to deconstruct their social and cultural affiliations, differs from the history written by non-native researchers guided by objective interests. I do not intend to bracket all native researchers as one category, there are several native researchers, who are well versed in historical research methods and as a result have produced closer objective perspectives.

The writing of Indian history was initiated at first to fulfil the needs of the outsiders, the colonial masters, in the Pre-independence period. The outsider's approach is useful, if there is no hidden agenda, for an objective perspective, as the outsiders are not bound by the compulsions that affect the native researchers. Therefore, history written by non-local researchers, who are professional in their approach and not without any "agenda", can bring out new perspectives. Sometimes, "outside" opinion is also considered to offer importance or value ("exotic foreign seal") to the history of region. However, we cannot underestimate the contribution of native researchers, who carry certain innate cultural cognitions and understanding. Often the collaborative attempts between the native and non-native researchers can produce very good results. Noboru Karashima in fact built strong collaboration with native researchers in understanding the history of South India.

We need to look at the global context of intellectual production and the academic contexts. While the colonial powers wanted to generate knowledge on the communities that they had subjugated, for hegemony, in the post-colonial and post-World War scenarios, the knowledge of the "other" was considered important for the existence and dominance of the major powers of the world. The development of "areas studies" in the Western Universities is seen as a result of "Post-Second World War National State Paradigm" (Barrow 2000: 206). This trend seems to have influenced Japan too. Prior to the 1940s, the South Asian studies in Japan mainly focussed on Indology, Buddhism and Buddhist

philosophy and after the World War II the focus shifted to broader area of social sciences and the semi-government agencies which "were designed to contribute to the government's expansionist policies" (Koga 1993: 99). In the Tokyo University of Japan, the Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia was established in 1941 in order to undertake "comprehensive studies regarding Oriental culture." The imagination and construction of Asia as a region, perhaps also contributed to the development of such interests in other Asian cultures.

The interest in Indological studies and South Indian or Tamil Studies increased after the 1950s, due to the impact of the area studies programmes and also because of the fresh interest on cultural and intellectual production among the regional cultures of India in the post-independence period. The World Tamil Conferences organized around the world from 1966 brought together various scholars, interested in Tamil Studies, from all over the world. Noboru Karashima (1966) presented his account of the study of the villages of Allur and Isanamangalam in the Cholamandalam in the first World Tamil Conference at Kuala Lumpur.

With the disappearance of the area studies, the development of strong Diasporas after the 1980s is contributing to the persistence of interest in Indian or Tamil studies in many parts of the world. The outside interest in academic research will definitely continue to grow in the age of globalization.

## **II. Noboru Karashima's Contribution to the History of South India**

Noboru Karashima was born in Tokyo in 1933. After he graduated from the Department of Oriental History under the Faculty of Letters of Tokyo University in 1958, he focused on South India and more particularly the Chola period. A detailed note on Noboru Karashima has been presented by Champakalakshmi and Subbarayalu (2015). The Department of Oriental History under the Faculty of Letters of Tokyo University played a significant role in the focus on the history of the Orient (Tanaka 1993: 12). We need to understand the Japanese interest in the orient and the cultures of Asia was a factor responsible for the development of scholars' interest in Asian studies. As I mentioned earlier my intention is not to give an assessment on the scholarly work of Noboru Karashima, and I briefly outline his contributions.

### **Publications**

During his research career spanning more than half a century, Noboru Karashima extensively published his research, and his

publications testify the scholarship of his work and his persistence interest.

### Books

The books published by Karashima are:

- Noboru Karashima, Subbarayalu, Y. and Matsui, Toru, 1978. *A Concordance of the Names in the Chola Inscriptions*. Madurai, Sarvodaya Ilakkiya Pannai.
- Noboru Karashima 1984. *South Indian History and Society: Studies from Inscriptions AD 850-1800*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press.
- Noboru Karashima 1992. *Towards a New Formation: South Indian Society under Vijayanagar Rule*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press.
- Noboru Karashima 2001. *History and Society in South India: The Cholas to Vijayanagar*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press.
- Noboru Karashima 2002. *A Concordance of Nayakas: The Vijayanagar Inscriptions in South India*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press.
- Noboru Karashima 2009. *Ancient to Medieval: South Indian Society in Transition*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press.

### Edited Books

- Noboru Karashima 1983. *Socio-Cultural Change in Villages in Tiruchirappalli District, Tamil Nadu, India*, part 1, ILCAA, Tokyo.
- Noboru Karashima 1985. *Acta Asiatica 48: Japanese Studies in Later Medieval Indian Society*. Tokyo, The Toho Gakkai.
- Noboru Karashima 1999. *Kingship in Indian History*, New Delhi, Manohar.
- Noboru Karashima 2002. *Ancient and Medieval Commercial Activities in the Indian Ocean: Testimony of Inscriptions and Ceramic-sherds*. Tokyo, Taisho University.
- Noboru Karashima 2002. *Ancient and Medieval Commercial Activities in the Indian Ocean: Testimony of Inscriptions and Ceramic-sherds*. Tokyo, Taisho University.
- Noboru Karashima 2004. *In Search of Chinese Ceramic-sherds in South Indian and Sri Lanka*, Tokyo, Taisho University Press.



Noboru Karashima 2014. *A Concise History of South India: Issues and Interpretations*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press.

### **Systematic Attempts and Statistical Methods**

Noboru Karashima adopted a very systematic approach to the research problems in history. After witnessing the selective use of inscriptions, to cite an interesting instance in history or for generalization, he argues that “statistical methods should be applied to the study of the inscriptions, which would be the only way to develop the study further, overcoming at the same time the difficulty which past studies have encountered.” (Karashima *et al.* 1978: ix-x)

### **Holistic Approach: On the Flaws of Selective Use of Data from Sources**

Selective use of data and random collection of data might not help to understand the context holistically, in any kind of research. Historians and archaeologists should seek to collect all kinds of available, relevant data at a given time, although research methods do suggest the sampling techniques. He realised the need for creating a database of terms in inscriptions, before going for meta-level interpretations and generalization. The empirical approach is one of the main hallmarks of his research. He observes that

“...socio-economic studies utilizing inscriptions carried out in the past are quite unsatisfactory for the simple reason that their method in the usage of inscriptions has been quite arbitrary. For example, one scholar would select those few inscriptions favourable to his view point, whilst another, taking a different stand-point, would select inscriptions favourable to his own view. The argument remains, therefore, essentially arbitrary and in many cases we are unable to discover which is true or near the truth” (Karashima *et al.* 1978: ix).

### **Focus on the Margins**

The early researchers invariably focussed on the Brahmanical religions and Brahmadheyas, perhaps because of the focus on the dominant presence of these groups in the sources materials. Karashima attempted to look at the margins as he had looked at the entire corpus of the Tamil inscriptions. His work on Paraiceri is an important publication focussing on the margins of the society (Karashima 1997).

### **Holistic View of Society**

Historical research is an intellectual exercise, which requires enormous amount of labour and financial resources, and a deep interest in history, proper problem orientation and research methods. Karashima

could generate the resources, and visualize the right methods and approaches to explore the history of South India. Because of his interest in social science perspectives, he could understand the social formations and the holistic view of the society.

### **Indian Ocean perspectives**

Noboru Karashima had developed a good grasp of the history of South India, and had the perspective of analysing the meta-level developments across the Indian Ocean region. His projects on 'Reconsidering the Relations between South Asia and Southeast Asia during the Ancient and Medieval Times' and 'Medieval Commercial Activities in the Indian Ocean as Revealed from Inscriptions and Chinese Ceramic-sherds' involved researchers from India and different parts of the world. He had a very good grasp of the historiographical developments in the regions of Indian Ocean. He stressed the importance of moving away from the paradigm of "Indianization" in Southeast Asia and pointed out the lack of interest on the trans-regional medieval commercial activities, as many of the national historians focussed within their regions, because of various social and political compulsions (Karashima 2002: x). His work helped coordinated research in documenting the inscriptions that are spread across South Asia and Southeast Asia. With the support of scholars such as P. Shanmugam and Y. Subbarayalu he could bring out the importance of the epigraphical sources. He also encouraged the studies of Chinese ceramics found in many sites of South India (Karashima, 2002, 2004). He marshalled the intellectual and financial resources necessary to undertake research across the Indian Ocean, which was not easily available at that point of time.

### **Synthesis**

Based on the vast amount of data that he had collected, he could synthesise and understand the broader socio-economic issues in the history of South India. Using the information from the inscriptions, he could understand the dynamics of the village societies of south India and this work helped negate the age old views of static Asian societies.

### **Political to Social Science Perspectives**

The early researchers on Chola history focussed, mainly on the political history and certain components of economic history. From the time of Karashima, the focus shifted on understanding the village economy and the social and administrative systems. His attention to the names of the smaller chieftains, the administrative officers and

ordinary individuals found in the inscriptions gave much necessary importance to the numerous individuals who were actively contributing to the history of the medieval period. In fact, the credit for taking the history of the Medieval Cholas to a new level goes to Noboru Karashima and Y. Subbarayalu (1973), P. Shanmugam (1987) and other researchers who were associated with him.

### **Collaborative Approach**

Collaborative approach does not go well in many research contexts, due to a number of factors, more particularly inter-personal factors. Noboru Karashima could build a team by bringing many researchers together and could successfully collaborate with them. His long standing association with Y. Subbarayalu and collaborative efforts with P. Shanmugam had benefited the research on the history of Medieval South India.

### **Conclusions**

Historical research or any other intellectual exercise requires, among other things, the love for knowledge and steadfast objectivity, which could drive historians to search for and go nearer to the "truth." Noboru Karashima adopted an empirical, scientific approach to data sources and historical analysis. Noboru Karashima was perhaps indeed delighted in the pursuit of the intellectual journey into the historical landscapes of South India. With a true understanding of the importance of the medieval epigraphs, he could bring about a change in the approaches to the history of South India from the 1970s. His approaches are definitely a guide to researchers who are interested in pursuing serious research on the history of South India.

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