

Circumambulations in South Asian history

Review >
South Asia

As recent events in the Middle East demonstrate, warfare and economics are perennially powerful forces in the shaping of history. Commercial imperatives can demand military solutions to problems of supply and demand, while the waging of war is itself a complex economic procedure. At the same time, the militarisation of specific social groups or geographic regions can have profound effects on the evolution of cultural identities and the organisation of social life.

By Nile Green

In his *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), Dirk Kolff re-framed the military history of India with his model of the military labour market in North India which drew on an armed peasantry, and helped shape group identities ('rajput' in particular). By re-conceptualising the military world of early modern India into which Britain and its colonial competitors entered, Kolff and others have been able to re-assess the impact of colonial rule. As a tribute to Kolff on his retirement from Leiden, the fourteen essays gathered in *Circumambulations* are a fitting blend of military history, colonial engagement and related theoretical issues. Jos Gommans appropriately places Kolff within a Dutch Indological tradition and traces his intellectual genealogy therein. Co-editor Om Prakash completes the introductory section with a survey and appraisal of the contributions.

The studies begin with Jan Heesterman's essay. Heesterman argues that, paradoxically, the impact of Islam as an integrative force in the Indian Ocean world was limited in India since coastal towns lacked the urban institutions to spread Islam beyond the coastal littoral. Some readers may find that his notion of the 'typically urban imprint' of Islam smacks of the essentialist assumptions that Kolff has done so much to shatter.

European impact

The following five essays discuss the early impact of the European presence in India. Hans van Santen makes use of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) archives to argue for a greater impact of the Dutch in North India, via an examination of their dealings with a leading Gujarati entrepreneur, Virji Vohra, in the 1630s. René Barendse reflects on Kolff's work on the transition of the armed peasant to the 'modern' sepoy through examination of the role of Indian troops in the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*, arguing that 'not merely the British but all major European states in Asia ... turned into "military fiscal" states in the eighteenth century' (p. 70).

Mark de Lannoy and Hugo s'Jacob draw again on VOC archives to examine the machinery of bureaucracy behind two major Dutch military disasters, describing respectively the trials following the catastrophic Dutch war with Travancore in 1739 and the rationale behind the disastrous VOC expedition in Bengal in 1759. Bhaswati Bhattacharya's contribution on the eighteenth century Armenian 'adventurer' Khoja Gregory marks the transition between the military history of the colonial regimes and earlier Indian kingdoms, re-assessing Khoja Gregory's career as military advi-

Portrait of Shaistah Khan



Courtesy of the Kern Institute, Leiden University, the Netherlands

sor to the last independent nawabs of Bengal.

Warrior states

Three of the most noteworthy contributions echo Kolff's work on the pre-colonial organisation of military manpower. Simon Digby employs two new Indo-Persian sources to examine an important military episode in the often-neglected history of the Sultanate of Jawnpur. Assembling a new chronological sequence for the revolt against the Lodi rulers in 1489, Digby expands on Kolff's work by arguing that the revolt shows how 'effective military manpower could be raised from the armed peasantry of Awadh at the date of the rebellion to establish an effective administration' (p. 160).

In the following essay, Jos Gommans expands Kolff's insights into another neglected regional polity, the Bangash nawabs of Farukhabad, to present a case-study of Indian military slavery that was 'only for a relatively short time able to succeed and as such it always remained a predominantly Middle Eastern phenomenon' (p. 214). Scholars of the warrior and successor states of the eighteenth century will be intrigued by Gommans's explication of the *chela* (elite slave) system, which recounts the history of Farukhabad and examines questions of Indo-Afghan group identity. In the third essay in this section, Godard Schokker examines Braj sources on the history of Bundelkhand, using genealogical poetry to explore the self-perceptions of its rulers and shed light on their relationship with brahmins.

Dickens and Tod

Two further contributions address the careers of two of the least and best known British colonial servants in India. Echoing Edward Said's claims in

Culture and Imperialism, Dick Kooiman discusses Charles Dickens' connections and attitudes to India through the brief Indian career of his son, Walter. Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph in like manner interpret James Tod's formative colonial study of Rajasthan, using this and other sources to present Tod as a romantic nationalist entwined in the politics of John Company. Victor van Bijlert and Jan Brouwer present theoretical essays respectively addressing the impact and meaning of the idea of modernity and of modern communication media in India. The volume is concluded with Dietmar Rothermund's summary of the history of warfare in South Asia from chariot to atom bomb.

Both colonial and Indo-Muslim historians will find something of interest in this volume for which delight clearly lies in the detail, while those with less specialised interests will benefit from the more general articles. Given the prestige of the publishing house, the number of typographic errors (over three dozen) and the presence of more than one incomprehensible sentence is disappointing. On the whole, however, the editors are to be congratulated for commissioning and collecting a series of studies that complement so neatly the work of the scholar to whom they are dedicated. ◀

- Gommans, Jos and Prakash, Om, eds., 2003. *Circumambulations in South Asian History: Essays in Honour of Dirk H.A. Kolff*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, pp. 370, ISBN 90 04 13155 8 (hardback).

Nile Green is Lecturer in South Asian Studies at the University of Manchester, U.K. His research interests include Sufism and the history of Islam in South Asia. nile.green@man.ac.uk

Traditional Malay

It is not an every day event that a book on Malay literature sees the light. It is even more rare for such a book to appear in English. Previous works on classical Malay literature were often 'one-sided, racially prejudiced, and tended to deny the intellectual originality of indigenous Malays' (p. xiii). The current volume is an effort to redress this situation.

Review >
Southeast Asia

By Dick van der Meij

Looking at the title of the book, we see that the term 'classical' has been replaced by 'traditional', implying Malay literature is part of a continuing tradition. 'Classical' presupposes that much of this literature is 'ancient', which it is not. If we look, especially, in the field of so-called *pantuns* (short Malay verses), we see that this tradition has never ended. This was crystal clear on a recent trip I made to Riau in North Sumatra for a seminar on the revitalization of Malay culture. Many of the lectures were preceded by pantuns, as was the opening speech of the (Balinese) Indonesian Minister of Culture and Tourism, causing much admiration among the predominantly Malay audience.

*Golden langsat fruit peer out through the leaves
The pink rhododendron had ceased to flower
Now I have you my groomsmen stand ready
I do not need my horns the war is over.*

The attention paid to the many kinds of indigenous short verse is a welcome addition to the existing literature, which has paid scant attention to this particular type of expression. Also new in this book is the space devoted to placing Malay literature in its wider cultural context, be it Malaysia, Indonesia, or other Southeast Asian countries by referring to stories going back to the Indian classics Mahabharata and Ramayana, and the so-called Panji cycle, to substantiate its claims of inter-textuality. And in distinction to most other general works on Malay literature, the book devotes considerably more space to texts with Islamic content. The authors rightfully points to both the destructive role of Islam in the Malay literary field ('Islam has destroyed many myths which once prevailed in the Malay world and dimin-

[advertisement]

Advertise in IIAS Newsletter

Rates	W x H (mm)	Standard (Euro)	Year's placement (4 issues) (Euro)
Fullpage	281 x 369	1,400	4,480
1/2 page	281 x 179	725	2,320
1/3 page	281 x 116	540	1,740
1/3 page	81 x 369	540	1,740
1/4 page	138 x 179	365	1,135
1/4 page	281 x 86	365	1,135
1/6 page	138 x 116	270	870
1/8 page	138 x 86	190	585
P&S	10 lines	n.a.	125

* Payments are accepted in both Euro and USD

Inserts

All subscribers: including institutes, specialists and non-specialists
Worldwide exposure, or a selection of countries and/or topical or regional interest.

Rates (including postage): Euro 3,300 (up to 20 grams)
Euro 500 (for each additional 10 grams)

Mailing label rental

You can order addresses from the IIAS Database of Asia Specialists for direct mail use.

Rates: starting fee: Euro 10
Euro 0.10 per address on self-adhesive labels.
Euro 0.20 for each label over 1,000 labels.

Further information:

Natasja Kershof, Advertisements
iiasnews@let.leidenuniv.nl
Vincent Traag, Mailing Label Rental
iias.subscribe@let.leidenuniv.nl