

# literature

ished the importance of still others' p. 98) and its positive role ('Islam has been more than a cultural presence; it has transformed Malay phenomenon into a wide-ranging phenomenon, which has become enormously productive and rich' p. 25).

Books presenting an overall picture of the literature of South-east Asian nations are much in need, not only for literatures in national languages, but also for literatures in indigenous non-national languages such as Javanese, Sundanese and the many other languages of this vast area. These literatures have influenced each other since time immemorial; general works would facilitate a better understanding of this fact. *Traditional Malay Literature* is a start for an important part of these literatures and as such a welcome introduction – not only for Western scholars, but for interested people in the region itself.

However, and despite its claims to the contrary, *Traditional Malay Literature* seems to be a continuation of the way this literature has been understood for a long time – an amalgam of Hindu and Arabic literature augmented by indigenous literary material. The categories used in this book do not seem very new, although the presentation is much more theoretically structured.

I am sorry to say that a few things have gone quite wrong in this book. Almost all Dutch titles mentioned in the bibliography have typographic errors. Further, many works mentioned in the book are not found in the bibliography. In an English-language book, clearly intended for non-Malay speakers, a comprehensive list of translations of Malay literary works would have been extremely useful. In the present work, many foreign editions go unmentioned in the text and are therefore not to be found in the bibliography.

*The handkerchief had a red border,  
I set foot aboard your boat,  
If my hand is wounded,  
red blood will flow  
If you break my heart no one will know.*

It is a pity that the authors have not updated the book since its previous publication in Malay in the 1990s. As a result, two voluminous works by internationally acclaimed specialists have been left out of the discussion. The first is Teuku Iskandar's *Kesusastran Klasik Melayu Sepanjang Abad* (Classical Malay Literature through the Ages), 684 pages, Brunei Darussalam 1995; the second is V.I. Braginsky's *Yang Indah, Berfaedah dan Kamal. Sejarah Sastra Melayu Dalam Abad 7-19* (The Beautiful, Meritorious, and Perfect. Malay Literature from the Seventh to the Nineteenth Century), 695 pages, Jakarta/Leiden, INIS 1998. Lack of updating has also left out the catalogues of Malay manuscripts in the library of Leiden University and other collections in the Netherlands written by Teuku Iskandar and Edwin Wieringa. For reasons unclear to me, numerous works of Braginsky have been ignored, which is a pity as his views on Malay literature add much to our understanding.

To conclude, my reservations above notwithstanding, *Traditional Malay Literature* is a welcome addition to what has been written on Malay literature to date, especially as, written in English, it can reach a wide audience. The book also shows that much work still needs to be done to come to grips with this much-neglected part of world literature. ◀

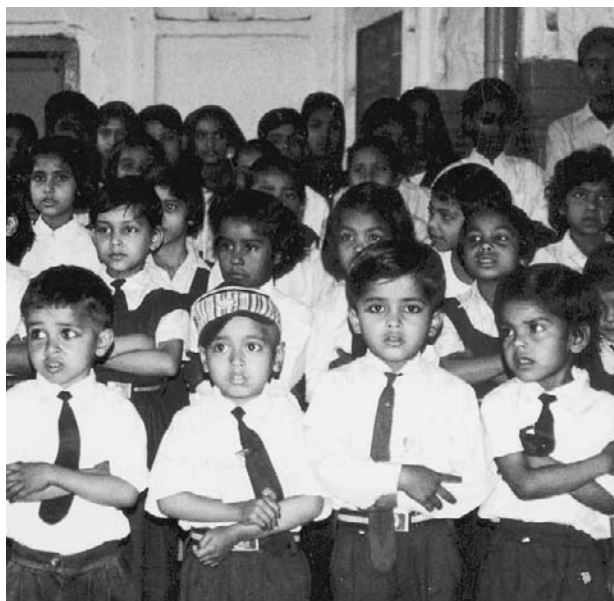
- Harun Mat Piah et al., 2002. *Traditional Malay Literature*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (trans. Harry Aveling). Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, pp564, ISBN: 983-627202-X

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# Agency denied

Review >  
India

Indian anthropology has long been preoccupied with the study of caste (hence Hinduism), tribe, village, family and kinship. In particular, caste and tribe have been its obsession. Padma Sarangapani's *Constructing School Knowledge: An Ethnography of Learning in an Indian Village* is welcome as it moves away from the beaten path and signals a diversification of anthropology's thematic interests.



Children singing prayer song in a Jamaat-e-Islami school in Aligarh, India

By Irfan Ahmad

I picked up the book hoping it would offer more than thematic novelty. On reading, however, I was disappointed. To start, the book does not have a well-formulated hypothesis to prove, modify or dislodge. In fact, it does not have a precise question to engage. 'What is the nature of the child's construction of school knowledge' (p. 240) in a government primary school situated in Kasimpura, a village on the northern outskirts of Delhi, is a hazily broad question. What is more, the question is not situated in relation to a body of scholarly work in the anthropology of education. Instead, it is counter-posed to common sense and popular understanding, including that of government officials (pp. 10-13). Thus theoretically, the aim of the book is not very challenging. The

*the notion of childhood in Kasimpur, upheld by the adult patriarchy and equally endorsed by children, is that of a transitory phase to the more durable role of adult homo economicus*

chapter on the 'theoretical framework' appears as a mere appendix. It is the shortest of all, of no more than five pages.

### Children's perspective

The author is concerned with 'constructing common school knowledge' of two kinds. First, what is the ethos of the school, its web of inter-relationships between teacher and pupil and the pedagogic discourse and practices that surround it? Second, what goes into the making of the school curriculum? In approaching these questions, Sarangapani declares that her interpretation of data and ethnography are biased in favour of the child's perspective (p. 15). The focus on children's perspective is theoretically informed by what she calls a 'social constructionist framework' (p. 266) where meanings children attach to various practices and ideologies are brought to the forefront of discussion rather than glossed over or pushed to the periphery of debate. The book is thus about foregrounding the agency and intentionality of humans (p. 267), in this case children.

### Bada admi

The first four empirical chapters which address the first set of questions are ethnographically rich. The conclusion one draws from them is that the reason why students want to go to school, or their parents send them, is to become economically a big man, *bada admi* (chapter 3). The notion of childhood in Kasimpur, upheld by the adult patriarchy and equally endorsed by children, is that of a transitory phase to the more durable role of adult *homo economicus* (chapter 4); there is a value system shared by the school teachers as well as the local community which morally bestows the former with brutal power to discipline and control children who un-rebelliously acquiesce to them (chapter 5); the process of teaching and learning in the classrooms privileges teachers as epistemic-moral divines and renders the children passive recipients (chapter 6); and the principal mechanism of learning in the school is to cram or rote memorize the printed words in text books without bothering to comprehend them (chapter 7).

### Intentionality and agency

One does not necessarily have to be a specialist to arrive at her conclusions. They are fairly obvious facts of government-run schools in north India. What is, however, interesting to ask in the light of Sarangapani's theoretical framework is: where does the intentionality and agency of the children appear in her descriptions? If children's perspective is also that of the schoolteachers and local community at large, as her fieldwork generated accounts so elaborately show,

how useful is it to speak of doing ethnography from the perspective of children?

I continued reading the last two chapters, 'Children's Epistemology', part 1 and 2, expecting that perhaps they would live up to the promise made in the introductory and theoretical chapters. It was a disappointment again. In these chapters too, what we learn is that children rarely employ their agency and knowledge (not gained from school) to make sense of what is taught in the classrooms or what is written in the textbooks. They simply reproduce the version of social and school reality as filtered down to them by teachers and books. Sarangapani does mention one solitary instance of a conflict where a class V boy, based on his own experience of farming, cautiously challenges what is written in a textbook and what the teacher teaches him (p. 205). But eventually children unceremoniously submit to the combined power of printed books and teachers' words. One wonders, is this, then, epistemology of children or epis-

temology of teachers/textbooks or the society at large voiced by children?

We learn that children at Kasimpura school have little agency. Their pre- or non-school cultural resources have no relevance to the school curriculum. There is no counter culture of students in the school (p. 120). They always submit to their gurus. Yet, Sarangapani promises readers to offer the viewpoints of children and highlight their agency in the construction of school knowledge. The gulf between the theory and descriptions is thus stark. One imagines that the agency of children would have become more apparent had she paid attention to the hidden curriculum and co-curricular activities of the school.<sup>1</sup>

Another theoretical weakness is the book's unquestioned acceptance of the widely accepted categories of indigenous Hinduism-based education standing in contrast to the liberal-modernist-enlightenment view of education (pp. 176-80, 255 ff). In recent scholarship it has been argued that what passes off as an indigenous or purely Hindu worldview is indeed a construction of nineteenth century religious reform movements which in turn were deeply influenced by the conceptual vocabulary of the Western Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> Parenthetically, one is left wondering whether the few Muslim students whom Sarangapani peripherally mentions also relate themselves to the Hinduism-based indigenous framework. If not, why has their framework, perhaps an Islamic one, not been discussed?

The book thus appeals more to a practice-oriented audience, i.e. policy makers of primary education than to 'pure' academics. This also seems to be one of the principal audiences the author seeks to address. ◀

- Sarangapani, Padma M., 2003. *Constructing School Knowledge: An Ethnography of Learning in an Indian Village*. New Delhi: Sage Publications. Pp. 308. ISBN 0-7619-9671-0 (Hb) (US), 81-7829-135-5 (Hb) (India)

### Notes

1. See, for instance, Schifffauer, Werner, et al, eds., 2004. *Civil Enculturation: Nation-State, Schools and Ethnic Difference in Four European Countries*. New York: Berghahn Books.
2. Van der Veer, Peter, 2001. *Imperial Encounter: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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