Interview

CONVERSATION WITH T. K. V. SUBRAMANIAN

As the principal historian working on Southern Indian history in one of India's premier universities, the University of Delhi (DU), for close to thirty years (1984-2012), what were the problems you recognised in the teaching-learning of and research in the history of Southern India?

I joined DU as Reader in South Indian History (because the advertisement said so) with a) ability to teach both ancient and medieval, and b) proficiency in at least two South Indian languages. The only compulsory course at that time (1983) was Vijayanagar Empire. In the interview also, I was tested on Vijayanagara inscriptions and Burton Stein's views on the nature of state and society in South India.

Most historians were writing about coherent core regions, characterised by stable, long-term political and cultural institutions. Considerable data was available on some core regions like North India, Bengal or the Tamil South.

The major difficulty was the loose and overlapping usage of 'Deccan' and 'South India'. North Indians conceived of the Deccan as lying vaguely to the south of the Gangetic plains while the Tamils located it in the north of their native regions. Geographers were able to define it on their indices while historians could not do it as a historical region.

The compulsion was to innovate 'Peninsular India' as a counterpart to 'North India'. My concerns are well articulated in the Introduction of *Streaming the Past: Peninsular India in History*, edited by Nilanjan Sarkar and Vikas K. Verma (Primus Books, 2019) (pp. 1 to 27).

Nilanjan did an M. Phil. on *War and Social Change in Medieval South India: Battle of Talaikota*, in 1996, and Subha Narayanan did a Ph. D. on *Elites, Ideology and Political Culture under Adil Shahis of Bijapur (AD 1489 to 1686)*, in 2007. These two dissertations were done from a 'Deccan' perspective.

How do you understand the idea of 'South India' historically?

Among the major works of S. Krishnaswamy Aiyangar, the first Professor of Madras University, one finds *Beginnings of South Indian History* (1919) and *South India and her Muhammadan Invaders* (1921). However, the credit of defining South India goes to the successor of S. K. Aiyangar, namely, K. A. Nilakanta Sastri.

"We mean by South India all the land lying south of the Vindhyas – *Dakshina* (Deccan) in the widest sense of the term". Sastri justifies his perception citing the shortfalls of R. G. Bhandharkar's *Early History of the Dekkan* (1895), S. K. Aiyangar's works and P. T. Srinivasa Iyengar's *History of the Tamils* (1929) as early history of the Extreme South. Extreme South and Far South also came to be used in historical practice.

Noboru Karashima edited a volume titled *A Concise History of South India (Issues and Interpretations)* (OUP, 2014), which follows Sastri's formulation. Interestingly, the second chapter begins with the Satavahanas in the Deccan, followed by Sangam, Early Tamil Polity and Post-Satavahana and Post-Sangam polities. In a text book or tool book, the overlap confusion of Deccan/ South India/ Tamilakam continues even now. For example, *India in the Persianate Age, 1000-1765*, by Richard M. Eaton.

Is there a need to problematize the way in which 'South Indian History' is located in Indian History?

Until the arrival of the British in India, histories of 'India' were unknown. The colonial historical engagement focused on the North. There is no denying the fact that Delhi's centrality had good reasons. These have been analysed by Bernard S. Cohn, C. A. Bayly and a few others. In relation to the North, there has been a categorisation of the remainder of the subcontinent as 'regions' – that they are 'regional' in relation to Delhi. We need to move to a history of regions framework, marking centralization wherever and whenever these occur.

Burton Stein's *A History of India* is a posthumous publication. The introduction is interesting. It begins thus: "Writing history involves the selective compression of time; recency has a decided priority". He goes further to talk about a selective factor at work which has much to do with the interests and knowledge of historians within each time period. Burt felt the need to problematize the evolution of political forms in India (not South India alone) in a chronological scheme.

1. Communities without States (BCE 7000 to 800)
2. Communities as States (BCE 800 to 300 CE)
3. Communities and States (300 CE to 1700)
4. States without Communities (1700 CE to the present)

In studying Tamil history, how have you pushed the boundaries of the field from the time that your first book – *Political Change and Agrarian Tradition in South India (1600–1801)* (Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1986) – was published?

My first book was derived from my thesis, *History of Tinnevelly, 1600-1900*. I followed Sastri's framework of Sangam, Pallava, Chola, Vijayanagar, Nayak, Nawabs and the British. My focus was on Nayak to Nawabs, and Nawabs to the British, as political change, and to examine the impact of this change on agrarian tradition in terms of structural changes. In the sources of Tamilakam (both literature and epigraphy), socio-political forms are more visible than socio-economic forms. I have written elsewhere about empirical studies of Subbarayalu and Karashima, and the theorising efforts about regional state and society by Burton Stein, James Hertzman, Kathleen Gough, Noboru Karashima and myself.

I have proposed an evolutionary process of Societas to Civitas and Civitas to Empire on the principle of kinship and its increasing sophistication. The Cholas adopted several strategies to dominate agrarian society through manipulation of marriage alliances among dominant groups and exploitation of labour of kinsmen and non-kinsmen alike. By and large, they succeeded in converting the loyalty of the people from clans, villages and *nadus* to one for a political system (or State). In other words, stages of social development, or social formations approach of chiefdom, kingdom and State, corresponding to Sangam, Pallava and Chola, will be appropriate for a holistic study of each social formation and change to another.

Similarly, Vijayanagar and post-Vijayanagar phases should be studied as separate social formations. Thematic studies on trade, kingship, philology, monumentality, women, art, murals, cult and religion would be helpful in making these studies empirically sound.

Coromandel Trade in Early South India: An Archaeological Perspective by Vikas K Verma (Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi, 2021) and *Social Significance of Religious Endowments in Tamil Country, c. AD 12th-16th centuries* by Sreelatha Yagneshwar (Ph. D., 1992) are two good examples of empirical research following these approaches under my guidance.

Is there a Tamil historical sensibility? How would you describe it?

These are the days of *The Language of History* (Audrey Truschke) and *Scripts of Power, Writing, Language Practices, and Cultural History in Western India* by Prachi Deshpande.

The cultural history of Tamil and its historical sensibility is very natural and ancient. The language is spoken today by some eighty million people in South India, Sri Lanka and a diaspora spread over Malaysia, Singapore, Fiji, South Africa, Paris, Toronto and many other parts of the globe. The cultural role of Tamil is, however, not analogous to Latin or Sanskrit, for what Sheldon Pollock calls 'Cosmopolis'. As a student of history, I agree that the language, its themes, images and traditions shaped an extraordinarily long-lived and richly elaborate culture or series of cultures, along with the political and social orders that emerged out of those cultural matrices.

David Shulman's *Tamil: A Biography* (2016) is good reading for anyone who wants to know the above aspects. I entirely agree with David Shulman when he describes it as "a body of knowledge, some of it technical, much of it intrinsic to an ancient culture and sensibility, well documented in a continuous literary tradition going back many centuries".

How did your recent turn towards the history of music come about? What are the issues of the field?

Most history courses don't make a mention of music at all. Even if it is mentioned in books, the authors relegate music to the background.

I was personally happy to see Bonnie C. Wade, *Imagining Sound: An Ethnomusicological Study of Music, Art and Culture in Mughal India* (Chicago, 1998), in the NBT, and *Medieval India: Study of a Civilization* authored by Professor Irfan Habib.

At the turn of the millennium, the historian's concern with time, chronology and the placement of objects, ideas and individuals within an identifiable past shifted to products of artists, architects, cartoonists, musicians, interviewees or landscape designer function. *Zeitgeist* = time spirit or spirit of the age = cultural production. Historians started looking for history beyond the text or to alternative sources. Fine Art (creative image), The Cartoon (the image as a critique), The Photograph (the still image), Film & Television (the moving image), Music (composed sound), Oral History (the sound of memory), The Internet (virtual space), Landscape (the configured space), Architecture (the built object) and Material

Culture (the object) became important. In other words, historians were compelled to look beyond the traditional sources and look into visual, oral, aural and virtual sources to inform their work. These sources pose challenges and require new skills of interpretation.

My father worked on Carnatic Music and the Tamils during 1989-1992 in an ICHR project. I assisted him in that project, then co-authored *Rhythm in Historical Cognition* a year later. During this time, I learnt about several literary texts on rhythm like *Panchamarabu, Bharata Sangraham, Talasamudram, Vadya Ranjanam, Adibharatam, Bharatarnavam, Tala Dipikai and Sangeeta Chandrika*, etc. Regular treatises on music like *Manasollasa, Sangitaratnakara, Sangita Suryodaya, Swaramela Kalanidhi* and *Chaturdandiprakasika* have regular chapters on *tala*.

I got interested in the theory and practice of percussion art. In other words, the academic understanding of the art and its pedagogy in 19th and 20th centuries. From 1998 onwards, I started working on Music History. *Music as History in Tamilnadu* (2010, Primus Books), is a collection of my endowment lectures and writings. When I was in the School of Art and Aesthetics in JNU as an external member, I helped Partho Dutta to frame an M. Phil. course on Music History.

What do you think of the cultural turn in history? Do you think that while it has enriched history, it has also made the subject somewhat direction-less?

I would like to respond to the expression 'cultural turn' in the sense of 'linguistic or cultural turn', in the context of the post-modern. Take for example *India before Europe*, a popular text book authored by Catherine Asher and Cynthia Talbot (CUP, 2006). There is a clear shift towards cultural orientations in peninsular India when they discuss Vijayanagara kings as exemplary Hindu rulers, Islamic influence at Vijayanagara, creation of a pan-South Indian culture, elite cultures in the seventeenth century, etc. One notices a deliberate shift to political-cultural framework from political-economic framework and socio-economic formations. I have already drawn attention to Zeitgeist = time spirit or cultural production.

Even Richard Eaton in his *Persianate Age* talks about political and cultural evolution at Vijayanagara and cultural production in the Gunpowder Age. The Balance of History and Memory, Oral History, Visual as an Archive, Fiction and History, have all come to stay.

As far as Vijayanagara studies are concerned, it is difficult to admit the criticism that it is direction less. Eaton has further proved the use of biography for social history, integrating architecture and

history, and collective memory and the re-use of the past. A multi-regional perspective on historical developments and interaction between Indic and Islamic cultures are the hallmark of India before Europe. If the emphasis is on culture, it is of the political elites, and this provides an alternative to political economy, maritime trade, agrarian system or administrative structures.

Vijayanagara Vision: Religious Experience and Cultural Creativity in a South Indian Empire by William J. Jackson (OUP, 2007) is an interesting work. Plato said that tradition is our friend, science our helper and reality our master. In other words, traditions, science and our actual experiences of the universe all teach us through their different visions, they extend us, expand our identities and abilities.

The Heirs of Vijayanagara: Court Politics in Early Modern South India by Lennart Bes (Leiden, 2022) is another example of the power of courtiers, court protocols and influences from Sultanate courts which highlight court culture.

Although the Department of History in the University of Delhi has often been a centre for path-breaking historical writing, it hasn't quite got its due. Can you tell us something about this?

The history of the Department of History goes back to May 1, 1922. Distinguished scholars and historians have served this department and their works still resonate in contemporary writing. They provided remarkable dynamism in making the department one of the best in South Asia. Names like T. G. P. Spear, I. H. Qureshi, Bisheshwar Prasad, B. B. Misra, Tapan Ray Chaudhry, R. S. Sharma, P. S. Gupta, Sumit Sarkar and Gyanendra Pandey command respect for their significant contribution to the discipline of history.

The Department's real strengths are the B.A. (Hons.) programme, cooperative teaching, and M. Phil. programme until the UGC dispensed with it. As far as research is concerned, colleagues have produced significant works, collaborated with foreign scholars and earned even an EurIndia project. With social and economic history as thrust areas, it successfully completed three terms of SAP (15 years in all) and got elevated to the status of Centre of Advanced Study in 2007. Couple of colleagues moved to Johns Hopkins and Cambridge, and earlier even Romila Thapar and Bipan Chandra moved to JNU. These are indicators of the excellence of the Department.

I have always felt that with so much of excellence (individual), the Department couldn't run a journal of its own, couldn't develop a school of thought comparable to Allahabad or Aligarh and produce 'path-breaking' works. As a teaching department, we were up to

date but couldn't be spectacular in knowledge generation. We excelled in knowledge transmission, for that we got the recognition; but probably fell short in knowledge generation. Multidisciplinary thinking and inter-disciplinarity are the demands of the 21st century. I sincerely hope that our successors succeed where we could not.

(Interview, as given to Aditya Pratap Deo)