

BOOK REVIEWS

Dissent

Kesavan Veluthat, *Notes of Dissent: Essays on Indian History*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2018, pp. xix + 193, Rs. 1095/-, ISBN: 978-93-86552-70-9 (Hardcover).

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The book under review is a motley collection of essays by one of the finest historians of early and medieval South Indian history. As stated in Veluthat's self-confessional introduction, despite the variety of themes that the essays deal with, ranging from 'religious ideology, cultural transactions, social crisis, political criticism, regional historiography, cultural milieu of castes, Christian worship and propaganda and so on' (p. xiii), there is a common thread that runs through them, that of the idea of 'dissent'. Further the readers are informed that dissent expressed in these essays are not ideologically polemical; rather the dissent is informed by questioning the pre-existing historiographical trends in these themes, which are otherwise not connected to each other.

The first essay "From Dissent to Norm to Tradition" may be read in tandem with the essay in the Appendix, "Bhakti Movement in South India." Both the essays while questioning the fixity of religious ideas highlight the continuous evolving nature of Indian religious traditions. Whether it were the Upanishads that questioned the Vedas and Vedic rituals, or the notion of *bhakti* as an antidote countering the much feared catastrophic *Kaliyuga* in Puranic Hinduism or the bhakti movement challenging the social hierarchies, these essays point out that all of them were subsequently transformed from modes of dissent and protest to modes of dominance, and became sanctified traditions with a normative structure. The essays situate these religious developments from the first millennium B.C. to second millennium A.D. in the change from pastoral to agrarian economy, social changes, for instance the rise of a mercantile class, transition from tribalism to a monarchical state and development of institutions like temples. These transitions we are told were moments of 'watersheds' or turning points' in history. This contextualization in the material milieu

is a valuable exercise as it tells the reader that the kings and merchants became the patrons of the bhakti of the Alvars (Vaishnava saints) and Nayanars (Shaiva saints), transforming it from a movement of protest against formalised rituals and caste to an ideology of dominance that legitimized political power and social authority.

Thus, the author rightly points out that religion was not a pre-given static structure but a dynamic process constantly evolving with new sets of beliefs and norms. Drawing attention to protest and dissent in traditions apart from the much discussed Buddhism and Jainism, both the essays emphasise that dissent in a particular religious tradition, in this case Hinduism was not a deviance from it. Rather, it continued as an integral part of the tradition, imparted a plural character, as opposed to the widely held belief of being a homogeneous monolith. Further, an instance of a broad and eclectic religious outlook can be seen in the essay - 'Use of 'Hindu' Idioms in Christian Worship and Propaganda in Kerala'. Questioning the simplistic binaries between religious communities as mutually antagonistic, the essay demonstrates the ways in which the Catholic Church despite its fundamentalist attitude borrowed symbols and idioms from other traditions, which were otherwise an anathema to it.

The essays revisit the historical evidence, viz., textual and epigraphic and provide a fresh insight to them, thus, questioning some of the long held, well known ideas of historical research. In 'The Mauryan Presence in South India', Veluthat questions the colonial and nationalist historiography on the ubiquitous presence and domination of the Mauryan Empire in the sub-continent and concludes that this idea based on a somewhat flawed analysis of epigraphy and early Tamil literature, Veluthat argues that the Mauryans hardly registered any presence in South India. Revisiting archaeological evidences, the

author points out that the Mauryan influences through trade, Jainism and Buddhism and political and social ideas and institutions in South India were post-Mauryan in date, thus establishing the uneven, not so centralized hegemony of the Mauryan state as has usually been understood. Similarly, Veluthat revisits textual evidence in the next essay, 'Making the Best of a Bad Bargain' and questions the idea of *kaliyuga* as a period of social crisis only. Based on the examination of the Puranic texts of the third and fourth century CE, Veluthat feels that though the texts delineated the Kali Age as a period of horror and gloom, however there are evidences in them which also show this 'Dark Age', to be one of the bright and benign moments in time. We are told that the idea of bhakti had become simplified and easily remunerative and emerged as a counterpoint to the rigours of religiosity as it espoused 'inexpensive and effortless means' (p. 40) accessibility to god. In this essay, Veluthat raises important questions on the basis of the re-reading of the sources, especially the Puranas. One crucial question was that what seemed to be evidently described, as a social crisis was perhaps a period of social change. Second question was that what seemed, as a protest to Vedic ideas, bhakti was perhaps an attempt to reduce the latter's hegemony and finally accommodate it. However, we are cautioned not to eulogise the ideas of bhakti as protest and social change in the Puranic texts as these ideas also provided the much-needed legitimacy to a new ruling class to assert its power. In his characteristic witty and sarcastic style, Veluthat remarks, 'When the pied piper's pipe accompanied the slave driver's whip, the former seems to have worked better than the latter' (p. 42). This statement sums up the efficacy of the bhakti ideology as an apparatus for power and religion.

The essays on *Mahisasatakam*, a praise poem for a buffalo in Sanskrit and Manipravalam literature are focused at reading the sources through an alternate lens. *Mahisasatakam* has been described as a humorous poem critiquing the world of kings, courts, bureaucracy and

power structure, thus, highlighting the medieval attitudes of humour as articulating protest against the existing system. Similarly instead of looking at Manipravalam literature as a product of Nambudari identity, Veluthat examines its historical context of production. Composed in a milieu of flourishing trade and urbanism, we are informed that these Manipravalam texts inspired by the Sanskrit *kavya* literature delineated imaginaries of the city and urban forms.

Historicizing a region and the idea of a regional history is a significant theme that often questions a top-heavy, empire centric view. Analysis of regional dynamics can be seen in the three essays on regional history, origin and development of land relations in medieval Kerala and 'temple-dwelling castes' (p.xviii) in Kerala. It is rightly argued that regions are not pre-given historical entities. They evolve over a period of time, changing their characters and forms and are perceived in different ways. Thus, there is no one idea of a region. The essay titled 'Regional History in the Making of Regions' examines ideas of 'Kerala' and its differing meanings and identities to different people at different points of time. Similarly, the essays on land relations and temple dwelling castes locate the historical processes leading to the rise of brahmana landlordism, social hierarchy, endogamous kin groups and professional communities within the regional milieu of Kerala.

The essays in this collection though pithy often leave us with need to have more details. It would have been helpful to understand the arguments further if the readers were provided with a translation of Sanskrit passages quoted extensively in 'Making the Best of a Bad Bargain' (pp. 34-47) and 'Laughter in the Time of Misery' (pp. 48-63). Nevertheless, the essays provide an alternate pattern of analysis deviating from the well-established and hegemonic notions of history. Seemingly, a random collection, the idea of academic dissent runs through and provides valuable insights into various aspects of history.