

Kesavan Veluthat. *Notes of Dissent: Essays on Indian History.* New Delhi: Primus Books, 2018. 214 pp. \$54.95, cloth, ISBN 978-93-8655270-9.

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The great philosopher Susanne Langer (*Philosophy in a New Key* [1957]) taught us long ago that it is the formulation of new questions that moves knowledge forward, and less the answers to those questions. Kesavan Veluthat's *Notes of Dissent: Essays on Indian History* exemplifies this principle in its challenges to old assumptions and frameworks and in its formulation of productive new questions about early Indian history. Veluthat is a leading historian of South India, especially Kerala. In recent years, he has published a spate of new books and collected works both in English and in Malayalam. The book under review is a collection of previously published articles reworked around the theme of intellectual and social dissent.

Dissent in Veluthat's approach is both a critical element in refining historical understanding and a theme that characterizes cultural and social history in India itself. The first chapter sets the tone for the rest of the book by identifying a pattern in Indian religious history in which dissent turns to norm and eventually to tradition. The examples given include rejections of Vedic ritual discernible within the Upaniṣads themselves; invocations of the Kali Age to reject formalism in religious practice in favor of easier, cheaper religious acts; and the later rejection of Vedic ritual during the "Bhakti movement" and the formation of

South Indian Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva temple cultures. The wide scope of interest and the rather sparse evidence presented in this chapter likely derives from its origins as a conference paper. While the examples given are tantalizing (two are elaborated elsewhere in this volume), too many questions are easily raised against the central argument that are not fully refuted. Is there anything distinctively Indian about certain dissenting movements and ideas successfully becoming normative traditions? The Protestant Reformation, Reformed Judaism, and the Ash'arite victory over Mu'tazalite rationalism come to mind. Also, what about dissenting ideas that failed? Veluthat acknowledges such failures but does not ask whether more dissenting movements were silenced or integrated in Indian history.

The next chapter argues cogently that the "Mauryan political presence in south India is overdrawn" (p. 28). Emphasizing a lack of reliable evidence of political or material culture connections between the Mauryan state and South India, Veluthat further breaks down the still prevalent image of the Mauryan dynasty as a uniform and all-controlling state structure.[1] A thorough analysis of the positive images of the Kali Age follows in the succeeding chapter. Veluthat brilliantly shows how the ideology of *bhakti* turns the dreaded Dark Age into a period of relaxed religious de-

mand. New forms of worship and an “illusion of equality ... yields easier and more immediate results in that [Kali] age” (p. 39). In this way, Veluthat casts the rhetorical openness of the Purāṇas and their often positive depiction of the Kali Age as an ideological ploy to placate despised and excluded social groups, such as women and Śūdras. Next, Veluthat takes on casual impressions that India lacked traditions of political criticism through a close study of the *Mahiṣaśatakam* (A hundred verses for the buffalo), an eighteenth-century collection of poetic verses that skewers both royal and social decadence through a careful allegory in praise of the buffalo. Veluthat has published a complete translation of the work (*Mahiṣaśatakam of Vāñceśvara Dikṣita* [2011]), and his reading shows that intellectuals in difficult times had the capacity to express their disdain and criticism of political rulers of many kinds.

The remaining chapters in this volume are linked through a focus on the “region” as an object of study in Indian historiography, focusing on Kerala. Veluthat begins with a fascinating essay that asks the simple questions: “a region is a part of what” and how is a region historically constituted (p. 64)? Drawing on literature, inscriptions, and foreign accounts of Kerala in the period from roughly the twelfth to seventeenth century, he reveals the active efforts to construct an image of Kerala from various social locations and bases. The question of region returns in this next chapter about the extensive corpus of literature in Maṇipravāḷam, a conscious hybrid of Sanskrit and Malayalam. Contrary to the usual depictions of Maṇipravāḷam as proto-Malayalam and part of the origins of Malayalam literature, Veluthat demonstrates that the poetics of this corpus align closely with Sanskrit and that we would be better served by reading Maṇipravāḷam texts “as a continuation of the *kāvya* tradition in Sanskrit” (p. 89). This chapter is an excellent introduction to the Maṇipravāḷam corpus and includes summaries of its major texts. From literature, we turn to land relations and the way in which relation-

ships to land structure social relationships and stratification generally. Correcting some mistakes of the great Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, Veluthat examines a number of epigraphs from Kerala (ninth to thirteenth century) to confirm the unusual dominance of Brahmins as landholders in this and subsequent periods. Other social groups possessed rights to land that corresponded to their social position, though in ways that distinguished land tenure in Kerala from neighboring Tamilnadu. Social differentiation is further explored in a chapter titled “Congealing of Castes” in Kerala. Here as elsewhere in the volume, Veluthat relies on the *Kēraḷōtpatti*, a legendary history of the origins of Kerala. Using this framework, he investigates the process by which contemporary castes in Kerala developed through their affiliation with and work within the emerging temple culture of Kerala beginning in the tenth century. Though not meant to be exhaustive, Veluthat’s account provides a compelling explanation for the formation of several major caste groups in Kerala based on their position in the hierarchy of temple work. A last chapter on the regional use of “Hindu” idioms among Kerala Christians recounts the many conceptual and ritual connections between Hindu and Christian communities both before and after the Synod of Diamper in 1599 condemned heretical Christian practices in Kerala. Explicit citation of Hindu texts, *pūjā* elements in worship, and literary imitation of Hindu texts all distinguish the old presence of Christian communities in Kerala from other regions. In this context, Roberto de Nobili’s adoption of Hindu styles in Tamilnadu is exceptional for that region, but normative for Kerala.

The final appendix reprints a classic essay by Veluthat and M. G. S. Narayanan on the development of *bhakti* in South India. Their important argument was perhaps the first to note that *bhakti* ideas and institutions worked to legitimate emerging political structures and reinforce social stratification: “Both slavery and serfdom in India were sublimated by this equation with the divine or-

der.... Nevertheless, the brāhmaṇa remained the brāhmaṇa, and the pāṇa or paraiya remained the pāṇa or paraiya” (pp. 170-171).

These chapter summaries reveal the incredible breadth of Veluthat’s academic prowess. To move so deftly from religion to literature to economics to social stratification across multiple languages (Sanskrit, Prakrit, Maṇipravāḷam, Tamil, and Malayalam) and two millennia is an impressive and humbling feat. It is clear throughout that Veluthat knows more than he explicitly states. The notes often contain long passages of original text to which the author just refers, rather than explicating the passages systematically. For that reason, the adage to “always leave them wanting more” applies well to this collection. Each essay is wonderfully provocative and accomplishes the stated goal to highlight the constant need to question previous assumptions in historical work. However, several of the essays left me wanting more in terms of evidentiary proof for the arguments and in terms of the anticipation of counter-arguments. For the most part, I don’t care, because the point of the volume is to ask fresh questions with *prima facie* justification—mission accomplished. One can only hope that Veluthat will continue to publish further studies of Kerala and South Indian history, because the early history of this area sorely needs competent theoretically informed investigation of the sort found in this volume.

Note

[1]. Gérard Fussman, “Pouvoir central et régions dans l’Inde ancienne: Le problème de l’empire maurya,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 37, no. 4 (1982): 621-647; translated as “Central and Provincial Administration in Ancient India: The Problem of the Mauryan Empire,” *Indian Historical Review* 14 (1987-88): 43-72.

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