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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kesavan Veluthat. *The Early Medieval in South India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 376 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-569663-9.

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Published on H-Asia (December, 2009)
Commissioned by Sumit Guha



An Alternative Reading of South Indian History

The Early Medieval in South India by Kesavan Veluthat is a collection of essays by the author spanning two decades and examining the notion of “early medieval” in south India. The analysis in this book includes three sections of differing length, dealing with the problems and patterns in the history of Tamilakam, and the early medieval period in Kerala and Karnataka, respectively. Although several details of early medieval northern India have been worked out, there is a certain lack of clarity in the case of south India. Hence, the blanket application of the term “medieval” to south India is problematic, as opposed to north India where the phase is more clearly distinguishable in terms of larger historical schemes. This book, therefore, presents an alternative view of the early medieval in south India. It analyzes, for instance, whether there was an “early medieval” distinct from the preceding “early historical” formation and what processes were involved in this transition. The book also discusses the possibility of causally explaining the processes and structures characterizing the early medieval in south India. The role of temples and corporate bodies, the structure of land rights, the nature of the state, and the emergence of regional identity are some of the aspects that Veluthat focuses on in his historical reconstruction, with the use of epigraphic and literary sources.

Part 1, incidentally the most voluminous section of Veluthat’s book, deals with Tamilakam, with an emphasis on the period of the Cholas. Veluthat offers constant comparisons with the contemporary situation in northern India to identify points of similarity and difference

between the two areas. For instance, noting that the model of kingship in south India in the period of the Pallavas and after was largely derived from northern India, Veluthat qualifies that, in the particular context of the socioreligious history of south India, the element of divinity, which added another dimension to royalty, had special significance.

This aspect is linked to the rise of the temple as a religious institution, which was patronized by the state as well as other groups in various ways. The temple represented a revolutionary force in south India. It had a strong ideological weapon in the Bhakti movement and was able to register the victory of what can be called the Hindu Brahmanical religion. Its potential as an institution was realized by the monarchs of south India as early as the period of the origin of the monarchical state in this area, represented by the Pallava kingdom. The temple had functions of a social, economic, political, and cultural nature that were interrelated in a complex way.

Additionally, while identifying various aspects that marked the arrival of the state in this region, Veluthat examines the role of the *nadu* (a locality and a corporate group of spokesmen of that locality) in the sociopolitical structure of south India. In the process, he challenges and rejects some of the existing theories of state and society in early medieval south India. Noting that *nadus* were not miniature replicas of the political system existing at the center, he invalidates the major argument concerning the segmentary structure of the Chola state and stresses

the need for a “compromise formula” between the views of Nilakanta Sastri and Burton Stein (p. 43).

The structured relationship of land rights in early medieval south India is also discussed at length. Beginning with the Pallavas and getting more elaborate under the Cholas, this system eventually extended to cover the whole of south India. Veluthat notes that this compares well with the picture of land rights in early medieval north India (as outlined by R. S. Sharma), and can also be compared with the situation in medieval Europe. Such a structured society with a graded hierarchy of status variations, based on the extent of control over the means of production, found its expression in the *jati* formula, a Brahmanical paradigm in the historical context of south India.

At the same time, in this connection, Veluthat points to a major lacuna in the sources. A true picture of caste hierarchy cannot be obtained, because, given their concerns, temple inscriptions do not identify the large number of persons mentioned in them by their castes. He, therefore, stresses the need for a rigorous examination of the available evidence to identify social groupings in this period.

Part 2 deals with medieval Kerala. Veluthat begins by looking at a few expressions of historical consciousness in narratives from precolonial Kerala, notably the *Keralolpatti* that gives an account of Kerala’s history from the earliest times, to identify the notions of history prevalent in this part of India. In the process, he points to the conspicuous absence of *prashastis* (laudatory prefaces to inscriptions) in Kerala, a situation that distinguishes it from not only the rest of south India but also nearly the whole of the Indian subcontinent, where such texts formed the “historical introductions” in Indian epigraphy, and were used to legitimize the new monarchical state and the monarch (p. 189). The *Keralolpatti* is a Brahmanical document aimed at the validation of Brahmanical groups through a particular use of history. Veluthat uses this text to argue that Kerala, too, had a sense of history expressed in a form most suitable to its needs and that deriving from this, various regions in the Indian subcontinent would have expressions of historical consciousness that would relate to their differing social and political context.

Veluthat also examines the recent use of epigraphic sources to reconstruct Kerala’s history, identifying shifts in the paradigms and methodologies of using this type of source material. He points to the need for a comprehensive bibliography of inscriptions from Kerala and a more systematic analysis of their data, as has been done in the

case of the Chola inscriptions. He also discusses the earliest form of state in Kerala under the Ceraman Perumals from the ninth to the eleventh centuries AD. Additionally, he studies the rise of landlordism in medieval Kerala with a contextual analysis of inscriptional terms in this period.

Part 3, the briefest section, deals with early medieval Karnataka. Veluthat discusses the need to reorient the historical writing of ancient and early medieval Karnataka and place its inscriptional material, for instance, within the context of the pattern of sociopolitical evolution in early medieval south India. He also analyzes the institution of *velevali* figuring in documents from Karnataka after the eighth century AD. This institution involved individual soldiers attached to chiefs taking oaths of unswerving loyalty to them even in death.

Veluthat’s analysis, in this regard, is gender sensitive; he points to instances where the patrons in question were queens or other aristocratic ladies. He also draws an interesting parallel with “household warriors” of feudal Europe (p. 322). Incidentally, this aspect of *velevali* forms an interesting parallel with the situation in early medieval Kashmir, where loyal servants and soldiers would lay down their lives on the occasion of the death of their masters, often female ones.

Veluthat uses some humorous touches to justify his analysis at various stages. For instance, he points to the historian’s predilection for chasing the “Loch Ness Monster” in attempts to look for evidence of a crisis in various historical periods, which might have led to the dissolution of earlier modes of production (p. 46). He also wryly observes that when the evidence is not at peace with theory, it is the former that the historian should turn to, however alluring the latter may be.

There is very little to cavil at in Veluthat’s book. However, as he admits, the coherence necessary for a monograph on a single theme may not be present here, as the book is a collection of essays written at various points of time in response to different demands. One wishes, for instance, that the sections on Karnataka and Kerala were as detailed and comprehensive as the one on Tamilakam. Nevertheless, Veluthat’s delineation of various crucial aspects of the early medieval period in south India proves the existence of this phase as an intelligible period of study. Besides, in his attempt to provide an alternative reading of early medieval south Indian history, he addresses both the academic and the lay reader in his concerns and analyses. Veluthat’s book is, therefore, an important addition to our understanding of this period in Indian history.

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Citation: Devika Rangachari. Review of Veluthat, Kesavan, *The Early Medieval in South India*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. December, 2009.

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