

O B I T U A R Y

Noboru Karashima, 1933–2015

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Noboru Karashima
April 24, 1933 to November 26, 2015

Professor Noboru Karashima, the author of many books on India, her society, and people, died on November 26, 2015 at the age of 82.

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He had been in and out of hospital for several years, but always came back stronger and resumed his daily routine of writing about India. No one, not even a family member, thought that the end would come so soon.

He spoke and wrote to members of his family and to me from his bed until the final day. Two days before he passed away he even listed the things that I was to do after his possible demise, including details of how his funeral was to be conducted. He did not lose consciousness till the last moment. Early in the morning, when Mrs. Karashima was beginning to tell him that a new morning had dawned, she noticed that he was not breathing. It was, in a way, a very beautiful finale, and one that few can expect.

Professor Karashima graduated from the Tokyo University in 1958, and became a research associate of the Department of Oriental History. He moved in 1967 to the Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, and returned to the department at Tokyo University in 1974 as an Associate Professor. He was promoted to Professor in 1981, and retired from the University in 1994. He then moved to Taisho University in 1994, finally leaving full-time university life in 2008. During and after these years, he wrote and edited several dozens of books on India in Japanese and English. The esteem in which he was held as a true historian needs no special mention. He received the Padma Shri from the Government of India in 2013, and in 2007, the Japanese Government granted him the status of a “person with cultural merit.”

Professor Karashima once spoke to us about the initial motive for a lifetime spent in the study of India. He spoke of a personal memory of a hurtful encounter with the American occupation forces in the period immediately after World War II, and said that that was when he took a decision to work for Asia. It is my belief, however, that the true background to his decision lay in the 1950s, when Nehru, Sukarno, Nasser, Zhou Enlai, and other Asian leaders attempted to break through the structures of the Cold War, and in the brilliant role played by India in that context (many of the first generation of Indian specialists in Japan went to University in the 1950s).

The field covered by Professor Karashima was wide and extensive. English publications by him include *A Concordance of the Names in the Chola Inscriptions* (Sarvodaya Ilakkiya Pannai, 1978), *South Indian History and Society: Studies from Inscriptions, A.D. 850-1800* (Oxford University Press, 1984), *Towards a New Formation: South Indian Society under Vijayanagar Rule* (Oxford University Press, 1992), *Kingship in Indian History* (Manohar, 1999), *Indus Valley to Mekong Delta: Explorations in Epigraphy* (New Era, 1985), and *A Concise History of South India* (Oxford University Press, 2014). He wrote about Indian history, culture, and the Indian people in Japanese for Japanese readers. If I were to categorise his work broadly, I would say that it covered the Indus civilisation, East-West exchange with respect to the pottery trade, and, of course, ancient and mediaeval South Indian history. He also published three books on Indian cooking.

He was the president of the International Association of Tamil Research between 1989 and 2000, the president of the Japan Association of South Asian Studies between 1996 and 2000, and was the organiser of more than 100 academic meetings on South India.

The most distinctive features of his academic style were that he went through thousands of published and unpublished inscriptions, analysed them intensively (and sometimes extensively) by means of statistical analysis, and attempted thus to reconstruct South Indian history from below upwards. His well-known debate with the late Burton Stein about the nature of Chola and Vijayanagara states clearly indicates the merit of his methodology. When Stein presented a view of what he called the segmentary nature of the Chola and Vijayanagara states, Karashima argued in favour of Nilakanta Sastri's characterisation of the Chola state as a centralised one, his severe critique of Stein being based on a number of inscriptions studied by him. Karashima also focused on the conspicuous transformation of the Chola state in the 13th to 14th centuries, and argued that the Vijayanagara state shifted from a centralised to a decentralised structure around the late 15th to early 16th century.

As mentioned above, Karashima's arguments were always based on his analysis of the large number of original inscriptions collected and preserved in Mysore by the Archeological Survey of India. He cautioned those scholars who utilised only the summaries of inscriptions without consulting the whole texts. He followed the long-established tradition among Japanese historians of constructing history from below to above, going up to the level of the state.

I was the first student of Professor Karashima after he moved to the Department of Oriental History, Tokyo University, in 1974. As I majored in modern history, which was more or less out of his coverage, he introduced me to many eminent scholars working on modern India. He also gave me many opportunities to present my studies before academic audiences. I now follow his method in the education of my students.

His last work was *A Concise History of South India*, published by the Oxford University Press. While he wrote the chapters from the early to mediaeval periods, his former students or associates wrote the sections of the book that covered the early modern period and after. When the first print arrived, we held a small party. Professor Karashima looked extremely happy to be surrounded by us all. We said that, in the coming decades, the book would definitely become the standard work on South Indian history.

Japan has a number of specialists working on South India at the moment. They are all more or less the products of the efforts of Professor Karashima. He was exceptional – as a world-class historian and as a teacher and educationist. Along with many others, I pray for him. He will remain in our hearts and academic tradition forever.



Noboru Karashima planting a tree during the Colloquium on “Studying Village Economies in India,” sponsored by the Foundation for Agrarian Studies and others, Chalsa, December 23, 2008.