OBITUARY

Noboru Karashima: An Obituary

Parvathi Menon*

In a conversation with me a few years before he died, the historian Noboru Karashima ruminated over his lifelong connection with inscriptions – the source material from which he reconstructed the history of land tenures and class relationships in medieval south India.

"Some historians think I use the statistical technique to analyse inscriptional evidence in a mechanical way, that I base my historical conclusions on the frequency with which words and terms appear across a large corpus of inscriptions," he said. "That is wrong. In fact, I first listen to the whispering of inscriptions, I start conversations with them." It was not hard for me to imagine a phase of communion between this thoughtful Japanese academic, the son and grandson of scholars of Chinese literature, and his source material, much like a skilled potter might spend time understanding the properties of his clay before he starts working with it. Karashima spoke of the sudden insights and flashes of meaning that the familiarisation process – the whispering phase – often gave him.

For early and medieval south Indian history, inscriptions are its brick and mortar, and Karashima's vast historical contribution was built upon this primary historical source.

As with Chinese whispers, the messages in inscriptions are often distorted and parts are even lost. Consider the many ways that this may happen. The fragments of information chiseled into stone and placed on temple walls may yield to the force of the elements to which they have been exposed for thousands of years, thus rendering the estampages taken of them partial. Then follows the transcription of the inscription's content from the original to the modern script of the language it represents, also a process that involves transmission losses. A small proportion of inscriptions are then translated in summary form into English for academic study and use.

* London Correspondent, *The Hindu*

Karashima was a true pioneer in his field. Karashima's methodology envisages the use of data from a *mass* of inscriptions. Not only did he consult the original texts (including unpublished texts) of inscriptions in their thousands, he also used statistical methods of analysis in the study of these inscriptions.

When going through his vast published contribution to medieval south Indian history for this obituary, I re-read an article he had written on the properties of inscriptions as source material in a festschrift to him edited by Kenneth Hall (Hall 2001) (ed.), *Structure and Society in Early South India: Essays in Honour of Noboru Karashima* (New Delhi: OUP, 2001). Karashima argues that it was as a corrective to the standard method of reading inscriptions at the time he entered the field in the 1960s – which basically drew inflated conclusions from the reading of a small sample of inscriptions – that he developed his statistical technique.

He wrote:

> We have nearly ten thousand inscriptions from the Cola period, and if we examine all of them via statistical methods, we shall be able to notice valid tendencies in the data and thus avoid arbitrary judgments. My statistically-based study of Cola revenue terms, made in collaboration with others, revealed and documented many new facts concerning the Cola revenue system.

His method attracted criticism from some who argued that it flattened out the nuances in the source material. In Karashima's words,

> These authors criticised the statistical method my collaborators and I have been employing, by saying that these statistical studies rely more on a terminological approach and the conclusions derived from such studies reflect only changes in terminological phrases. Thus, "the edifice [Karashima built] stands on theoretical quicksand."[1]

Karashima stoutly defended his life's work:

> At any rate, their misunderstanding or distortion is such that, if one reads only their criticisms, one will certainly get the impression that my (our) study depends mostly, if not solely, on the mechanically applied statistical study of terms. This is far from the reality. On the contrary, I always start my study by reading inscriptions, as many of them as possible, so that I may listen to their "whisperings." Statistical analysis is applied afterwards to amplify the whispering or to ascertain the validity of my perceptions. As a historian I deem it very important to have a dialogue with the source material. I have never drawn conclusions from merely counting the number of terms alone.

Without the statistical method, however, the many inconsistencies of the data cannot be corrected.

[1] Karashima is quoting here from Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam (1995).

> It is true that the nonexistence of a tax term does not necessarily mean the nonexistence or non-imposition of that tax. However, we can raise questions, for example, about why a particular term does not exist for a certain period or area, in contrast to its existence for other periods or areas. We can also ask if the nonexistence of a particular term does mean the nonexistence of the tax itself. Statistical analysis is just a beginning that leads us to further study. If we had not examined the revenue terms statistically, how could we have started our study of the Cola revenue system, which we did by raising such questions?

In 1966 Karashima presented his groundbreaking study "Allur and Isanamangalam: Two South Indian Villages of Chola Times" at the first International Conference-Seminar of Tamil Studies held in Kuala Lumpur. Of the two villages near Tiruchirappalli, Allur is a non-Brahmin dominated village with its village assembly called the *ur*, and Isanamangalam, a *brahmadeya* or Brahmin-dominated village with the assembly of landowners called the *sabha*. He showed that private landownership had developed in Isanamangalam, the Brahmadeya village, whereas in Allur most of the land was held by the village community or jointly by a group of people. Further, in Isanamangalam, landlords either rented out or engaged cultivators to till the land, whereas in Allur the owners were themselves the cultivators. South Indian agrarian economy was dynamic, Karashima argued, and not static, as some historians had argued. Karashima's paper showed how differing agro-ecological conditions in two villages were associated with different socio-economic institutional arrangements.

Karashima published his work on Chola inscriptions in *South Indian History and Society: Studies from Inscriptions AD 850-1800* (Karashima 1984), which followed the publication of a three-volume concordance of names in Chola inscriptions, which he wrote with T. Matsui and Y. Subbarayalu.

The famous clash of interpretations between the two leading historians of medieval south India, Noboru Karashima and Burton Stein, in the mid-1980s was, methodologically speaking, a defining moment. Both historians used the same source material but arrived at very different conclusions. From his reading of inscriptions of the Chola and later Vijaynagar period Stein took a bold qualitative leap of interpretative imagination, arguing that the two medieval state formations were "segmentary." Territorial sovereignty was not centralised; rather, it comprised a series of zones over which the central authority exercised only a limited "ritual" control. This hierarchical pattern, i.e., of authority at the centre which fades into ritual authority in the peripheral zones, was replicated within each zone. The centre therefore exerted only minimal control: all functions of statecraft, like taxation and day-to-day governance, lay with the local units. Such a state would therefore not have a centralised taxation system, a bureaucracy, or a standing army.

Karashima's criticism centred on the limited and insufficient source base on which Stein rested his theory, which resulted in arbitrary and speculative conclusions for both the Chola and Vijayanagar periods.

> In my view, if this theory is at all applicable, it might be applied to the period from the Sangam kingdoms to the early stage of the Cola empire, only when the populations do seem to have been submerged in agricultural communities. (Karashima 2001)

In his 2009 book *Ancient to Medieval: South Indian Society in Transition*, Karashima moved into a new but allied area of study – that of social strife and its causes. He referenced an unusual allusion in a 13th century inscription to highlight his study of historical transition in the region. This inscription, from Tirukkachchur in Chengalpattu district of Tamil Nadu, records the decision by the people of the locality to apprehend five Brahman brothers who were responsible for inflicting all manner of atrocities on them. The inscription also records a complaint – an almost off-the-script insertion into the standardised inscriptional format. "These Brahmana brothers have now forgotten the old good habits of Brahmanas and Vellalas and are steeped in the bad behaviour of the low *jatis*," it says. For Karashima, this little lament for the loss of the old world and fears about the new underscored the nature of social churning that was taking place at the time. The old social hierarchies were shaking as new class alliances were being made – Brahmans made common cause with non-Brahman upper-caste Vellalas, as oppressed *jatis* or castes asserted themselves against the ritually superior orders.

In *Society in Transition*, Karashima argues that there were broadly three types of change that occurred over the period from the 12th to 14th centuries. First, the Chola state policy of land grants undermined traditional common holdings by creating in the Cauvery delta a class of private land-holders comprising Brahmans, Vellalas and other ritually superior castes. This affected the fate of "the common people who had been living in a traditional agrarian society," he writes. "Many farmers were deprived of their land and brought to ruin." Secondly, the development of maritime trade in the Indian Ocean accelerated this process of dispossession even as artisanal and merchant groups gained power. Thirdly, by the 14th century, the traditional landowning classes, comprising Brahmans and Vellalas, began to lose out to new landowners coming from the ranks of ex-hill tribes, who joined agrarian society by acquiring land and forming new *jatis*. This social upheaval also saw the birth of new religious belief and ideas.

From socio-economic change in the 12th and 13th centuries, Karashima moved to religious movements of the time. With his longtime academic collaborators Y. Subbarayalu and P. Shanmugam, he undertook a study of *mathas* and the two religious traditions – the Bhakti movement (7th to 10th centuries) and the Brahmanical north Indian tradition (11th and 12th centuries). The Bhakti movement is attested to by the recitation of Devaram hymns and Tirumurai in *mathas* of the 11th century and after. The North Indian Brahmanical tradition was brought south by the influx of Saiva ascetics to the Tamil country, which is shown by the appointment of those Brahmana ascetics as "rajaguru" by Rajaraja I and Rajendra I.

Karashima argues that the two traditions merged when the people of the lower social sections such as cultivators, merchants, artisans, hill tribes and soldiers, who had increased their power during the 12th century, also joined in *matha* activities in the 13th century, as our study of the inscriptions indicate. "Sivananabodam," written in Tamil by Meykandar, a Vellalla ascetic, in the 13th century, is the hallmark of this fusion of the two traditions and the establishment of South Indian Saivasiddhantism in the 13th century.

The last book Karashima edited was *A Concise History of South India: Issues and Interpretations* (2014).

Karashima carried his work as a historian into the related fields of linguistics, archaeology, anthropology, and agrarian studies. With the help of his colleagues he discovered and examined many Chinese ceramic sherds in various places in South India and Sri Lanka, which give tangible evidence to the development of East-West maritime trade carried out in the Indian Ocean during the medieval period. He also translated and published the Chola sections described in *Song-shih*, Annals of the Song dynasty in China.

When he died Karashima was Professor Emeritus at the University of Tokyo and the Taisho University. Karashima was active in the International Association of Tamil Studies (IATR), which held its first international conference in Kuala Lumpur in 1966. Seven more conferences were held, and he participated in all but two of them. He was elected President at the seventh conference in 1989 and organized the eighth conference in 1995 in Thanjavur. He resigned as President in 2010.

He served as the President of the Epigraphical Society of India and the Japanese Association for South Asian Studies.

In 2007 the Japanese Government granted him the status of "person with cultural merit." Karashima made a singular contribution to the strong tradition of India studies in Japan, and he was awarded the Padma Shri in 2013 for his contributions to building India-Japan ties. He was unable travel to New Delhi to receive the award, and former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, in a rare gesture of recognition and respect, personally presented the award to him during an official visit to Japan.

Karashima was something of a celebrity in Japan: he was the author of a popular book on Indian cuisine, and appeared on a popular television programme in which he introduced the history and culture of South Asia to the Japanese public.

Towards the end of his life, Karashima's abiding concern was the poor state of epigraphical knowledge, the foundation of pre-modern Indian historical studies. In an interview to *The Hindu* in 2010 he said

> Unless the knowledge of epigraphy develops, no ancient or medieval history of this country can be studied . . . [without it], history will be built only on the basis of ideas and theory, and not on substantial work based on historical sources.

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