BOOK REVIEW

A Contribution to Agrarian History

Parvathi Menon

Karashima, Noboru (2009), *South Indian Society in Transition: Ancient to Medieval,* Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp. 301, Rs 750.

The book under review (hereafter *Society in Transition*) is the latest in a formidable body of scholarly publications by the historian and epigraphist Noboru Karashima on the agrarian history of South India in the ancient and medieval periods.

In the book, Karashima chooses an unusual thirteenth-century inscriptional allusion with which to begin his description of historical transition in the region. The statement in this inscription, from Tirukkachchur in Chengalpattu district in Tamil Nadu, was issued in the name of people who described themselves as living in Brahmin villages, Vellala villages, and towns (*nagaram*) in a locality called Irandayiravelipparru during the reign of the Pandya ruler Jatavarman Sundarapandya. The inscription, the author writes,

> records the local people's decision taken on the atrocities of five Brahmana brothers. According to this inscription some chiefs caught the brothers at the request of the local people, but soon the trouble started again and another chief sent soldiers to catch them. Though they caught two of them, the remaining three brothers continued to fight in the forest and killed even the soldiers sent by the Pandyan king.[1]

The inscription goes on to record the confiscation and sale of property of the five trouble-makers. "These Brahmana brothers have now forgotten the old good habits of Brahmanas and Vellalas," say the authors of the inscription, "and are steeped in the bad behaviour of the low *jati*s."

In this reactionary lament Karashima sees the social churning of the age. The ruling classes bemoan the collapse of the old world. Traditional hierarchies appear to be shaking as Brahmins make common cause with non-Brahmin, upper-caste Vellalas.

Associate Editor, *The Hindu.*

1 Society in Transition, pp. 106 fn 13, 107.

The reference to the "bad behaviour of low *jati*s" in this context suggests that lower-order castes are being assertive or rebellious, a conclusion supported by evidence from other inscriptions of this period.

In *Society in Transition*, Karashima draws on information stored in the large corpus of inscriptional evidence to explain the process of historical change that is suggested by the tantalizing comment in the Tirukkachchur inscription. This process occurred from roughly the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, or from the end of the Chola period to the establishment of Vijayanagar rule.[2] According to Karashima, three broad types of historical change occurred over this period. First, the Chola state policy of land grants undermined traditional common holdings by creating a class of private land-holders – made up of Brahmins, Vellalas, and other important officials in the Kaveri delta. This affected the fate of "the common people who had been living in a traditional agrarian society," Karashima writes. "Many farmers were deprived of their land and brought to ruin."[3] Secondly, the development of maritime trade in the Indian Ocean accelerated this process, as artisan and merchant groups gained new power. Thirdly, by the fourteenth century, the traditional landowning classes, comprising Brahmins and Vellalas, began to lose out to new landowners who came from the ranks of ex-hill tribes, and who joined agrarian society by acquiring land and forming new *jati*s. This social upheaval also saw the birth of new religious beliefs and ideas.

Karashima elaborates upon these three successive types of change by establishing, through a careful and systematic study of inscriptional evidence, the interlinkages that led from one stage to the other. As in his earlier books (Karashima 1984, 1992, 2001, 2002), his evidence comes almost wholly from inscriptions.

All histories of this period, without exception, have based their work on inscriptional evidence.[4] There are roughly 900 Tamil inscriptions from the sixth to ninth centuries (corresponding to the Pallava and early Pandya period). In the Chola period (tenth to thireenth centuries), however, the inscriptions number about 19,000.[5] Till the twelfth century, inscriptions mainly recorded donations to temples. Thereafter, an increasing number recorded land transactions, government orders, decisions and resolutions of local assemblies, compacts amongst community representatives, and so on – the very range of themes being a reflection of the social flux of the age.

The hallmark of Karashima's scholarship is the methodology he has developed over the last 40 years of analysing such evidence. Karashima and his associates have

2 Karashima has written that South India in Transition is a "narrative," one that attempts "to perceive and share as a historian the various feelings that people living in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries in Tamil Nadu must have had towards changing society" (17 March 2010). And he adds: "Theory not based on empirical studies is a castle in the air" (ibid.).

3 See Preface.

4 Sastri (1955/1981), Ramanayya (1935/1986), and Ayyangar (1919/1986).

5 Society in Transition, p. 27

systematized and categorized the data from this vast body of inscriptions – each containing brief, and often fragmentary, pieces of information – by date, provenance, and theme.[6] Their methodology requires the application of statistical analysis, and it is now clear that the historical possibilities contained in inscriptional sources cannot fully be realized unless such analysis is applied. In *Society in Transition*, Karashima's historical narrative, reconstructed from data drawn from analogous sets of inscriptions, takes the reader through a world seething with change, where the connections and contradictions between socio-economic classes and social groups continuously transform social structures, relationships, and practices.

The essays in the book are arranged into three sections: the first deals with changes in land-holding and production systems; the second with the emergence of low-ranking castes that acquired economic and social power, and challenged the existing social hierarchy; and the third with overseas trade, the growth of merchant guilds, and urban expansion in the Chola and Pandyan states.

In his Introduction, titled "Emergence of Medieval State and Social Formation in South India," Karashima sets out the broad postulates of the book. His central argument is that land was the most important means of production, that the distribution of land and its control determined social relations between different groups of people, and that changes in the system of land control were responsible for changes in state and social formation.

The basis for Karashima's analysis of changes in land-holding patterns between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries is his view that the Chola state was a highly centralized administrative entity. There is ample historical evidence for this: the collection of land-tax by the state from villages even in far-flung Sri Lanka, the land surveys ordered by Rajaraja I and his son Rajendra I, the establishment of standardized measures of land and grain, the introduction of a new territorial entity by the Chola ruler called the *valanadu* (which was placed above the *nadu*), the references in inscriptions to a large number of royal offices and officials, and the promotion of overseas trade with China by the Chola rulers.

In this essay, Karashima takes forward the conclusions drawn from his now famous study of land-holding patterns in two villages near Tiruchirappalli, namely, Allur, a non-Brahmin-dominated village with a village assembly called the *ur*, and Isanamangalam, a *brahmadeya* or Brahmin-dominated village with an assembly of landowners called the *sabha*. His study, first published in 1966, showed that private land ownership had developed in Isanamangalam, the *brahmadeya* village, whereas most of the land in Allur was held by the village community or jointly by a group of

6 Three of the 14 essays in the book are collaborations with his long-time academic associates, Y. Subbarayalu and P. Shanmugam.

people. Further, in Isanamangalam, landlords either rented out or engaged cultivators to till the land, while in Allur the owners were themselves the cultivators.

Going forward, Karashima shows how land-holding practices in the same area changed dramatically between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. He writes that records of land sales and donations showed that "individual land holdings, which had been seen mostly in *brahmadeya* villages in the early period, became prevalent in *ur*-type villages too in the late period."[7] The increasing use in inscriptions of the term *udaiyan* to refer to a land-holder, and *kani* to refer to his right to the land, suggests an increase in non-Brahmin land ownership. The data also point to social stratification in non-Brahmin villages; for example, new titles denoting ownership of land – such as *nadudaiyan*, *nadalvan*, *muvendavelan*, *araiyan* (a title given to officers or local chiefs by the king) – began to appear in twelfth- and thirteenth-century inscriptions. Karashima argues that state patronage of these groups through land grants was responsible for such stratification. The expansionist policies of Rajaraja I and his successors in the middle Chola period brought a large amount of tribute to the Brihadiswara temple in Thanjavur. A part of this was used to improve irrigation facilities, which in turn improved the productivity and value of land.

The economic growth of the eleventh century, and the growth of a new landowning class, brought its own pressures on the Chola state in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Later inscriptions that record orders by the Chola rulers to protect the *kani* rights of land-holders living on the northern bank of the Kaveri suggest that wealthy and privileged land-holders on the fertile and developed southern side of the river were investing their wealth in the north, and in doing so, reducing the people living in *ur*-type villages, who were hitherto probably owners of the land, to the status of tenants or landless labourers.

Other factors aided this dispossession of one class of landowner at the expense of another. Following the loss of Pollonnaruwa, the Chola headquarters in Sri Lanka, Kulottunga I, who ascended the throne in 1070, abandoned the expansionist policy of his predecessors and increased the land-tax in order to raise revenues. This compelled poorer landowners to sell land to wealthy people such as the *araiyan*-title holders. It also created a new class of landowners: ex-hill tribes, like the Surudimans, who had joined the Chola army but lost their positions after the change in the state's expansionist policy. These groups began to buy land in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Karashima notes that "*periyanadu*, often prefixed by the name *chitrameli*, meaning 'beautiful plough', was a *nadu* network composed of hill tribes who had become agriculturists and formed their own *nadu*s."[8] These castes strengthened themselves against the power of the Vellalas and Brahmins by bringing into the *periyanadu* various assembly organizations comprising lower *jati*s like the *valangai*

7 Society in Transition, p. 12.
8 *Ibid.,* p. 16.

(right hand) 98 and *idangai* (left hand) 98. He writes that, in "the fifteenth century, these groups, together with the lower sections of the peasantry, openly revolted against the Vijayanagar administrators who oppressed them and the land-holding Brahmanas and Vellalas who sided with the administrators." Karashima further notes that there are many inscriptions from Thanjavur, Tiruchirappalli, and South Arcot districts that record the resolutions of the people who participated in these revolts.

Karashima's narrative shows how the inscriptions capture the many-faceted dynamics of social change in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Non-Vellala and Brahmin alliances were built by convening large assemblies that incorporated the *chitrameli–periyanadu*, the *valangai/idangai* groups, and merchant guilds such as the *manigramam* or *anurruvar*, whose activities become conspicuous in the thirteenth century as overseas trade developed. Maritime trade also gave a fillip to artisan-based industry, shown by the increase in references to artisan communities such as weavers, oil-pressers, and smiths.

"The increase in the economic power of artisans and merchants seems to have brought about the birth of new *jati*s such as Kaikkola, Vaniya, Kammala and Cheti in the late period towards the end of Chola rule," writes Karashima, and their growing strength was reflected in new tax impositions.[9] The "advent of a new age" was reinforced by evidence on the changing content of imprecations contained in inscriptions over time. The hatred expressed by "lower-caste" groups towards Brahmins, for example, in late thirteenth-century inscriptional imprecations shows the newborn confidence and power of groups such as hill-tribes, artisans, and merchants.

Weaving together information on social change and on political transition, Karashima shows how the thirteenth century was a period in which the Cholas came under pressure from the Pandyas, Kakatiyas, and Hoysalas. Within the Chola state, powerful chiefs such as the Kadavas and Sambuvarayas arose, and invasions by the Khalji and Tughluq dynasties took place in the fourteenth century. By the latter half of the fourteenth century, the Vijayanagar state established its control over the Tamil regions. Inscriptions of the thirteenth and fourteenth century continued to reflect the social upheaval of the previous century, the most notable of the uprisings being an open rebellion of the *idangai* and *valangai* groups in 1429 against Vijayanagar administrators, and Brahmin and Vellala landlords, in the heart of the Tamil country. However, the new arrangements introduced by the Vijayanagara rulers "seem to have pacified the Tamil country," writes Karashima, as sixteenth-century inscriptions do not mention revolts similar to the 1429 revolt. Karashima concludes that

> the social changes and political upheaval originally caused by changes in the land-holding system in the middle Chola period seem to have ended their

9 *Ibid.,* p. 18.

historical role by the end of the fifteenth century, bringing a new medieval state and social formation to the people of the Tamil country.

The essays that follow are essentially explications, with new evidence, of the inventory of ideas thrown up in the survey of historical change over three centuries that Karashima so convincingly sets out in the introductory chapter. For example, a study of the landlord–tenant cultivator relationship, where the landlord is often a temple, examines the two types of tenancy, namely, *kudinikki* (where the *kudi* or tenant is a tenant-at-will and can be evicted) and *kudininga* (where the tenant is not a tenant-at-will).[10] An essay follows that contains a detailed examination of two twelfth-century inscriptions that record royal orders for conducting public auctions of land in the lower Kaveri valley.

In an exploration of the historical antecedents of the *mirasi* and *watan* land tenurial rights of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra regions (which are the subjects of important studies by T. Mizushima and H. Kotani), Karashima examines two types of rights: the *kani* right (the precursor of the *mirasi* right in the Tamil regions), and those held by the village community based on a system of village servants.[11] In response to Kotani's and Mizushima's arguments on the centrality of the village community, with its network of village artisans and servants, to an understanding of pre-colonial agrarian reproduction, Karashima offers a slightly different thesis. He argues that "vertical relations," as between landowners and tenants, for example, were more important for agrarian reproduction than the "horizontal relations" between village servants and the peasantry – at least for his area and period of study.

The essays that comprise the second section of the book are significant new additions to our knowledge of social struggle and change in this period. Imprecations as a mirror to changing social attitudes, and, more importantly, to the shifting balance of power between the state, traditional castes, and emerging castes, is the subject of an important new study.[12] Brahmin landlordism and social dominance were challenged more directly too – by assemblies of lower castes from amongst the peasants, merchants, artisans, and former soldiers of the Chola armies.[13] New classes of local chiefs, who gained power in the hilly and semi-dry tracts of North and South Arcot and Chengalpattu in the latter half of Chola rule, created new types of taxes – the protection tax or *padi-kaval*, for example – that were important instruments of economic advancement.[14] Later evidence from the Puddukottai region shows how the *padi-kaval* tax became commercialized and could be alienated by means of gift or sale. Karashima argues that the commercialization of taxes in

10 "State, Temple, and Occupants of Temple Land," *ibid.,* pp. 27–54.
11 "Kani and Mirasi: Reproduction System Based on Produce-Sharing," *ibid.,* pp. 76–90.
12 "New Imprecations in Tamil Inscriptions and Jati Formation," *ibid.,* pp. 108–14.
13 "Periyanadu and Valangai/Idangai: Assemblies of Lower Jatis," *ibid.,* pp. 115–35.
14 "Local Chiefs and Padikaval," *ibid.,* pp. 136–54.

this semi-arid, agriculturally underdeveloped region could have been because of the robust commercial activities of merchant guilds here.[15] An essay on the role and historical transformation of the *nagaram* (town) between AD 850 and 1350 shows how *nagaram*s gradually broke free from state control and, by the twelfth century and after, joined the *ainurruvar* merchant guild.[16]

The thread of his historical exploration leads Karashima to the activities of South Indian merchants and merchant guilds overseas during and after the Chola period, a subject on which Chinese sources such as the *Songshi* (annals of the Sung dynasty), and Chinese ceramic-sherds in India and Sri Lanka, throw considerable light.

Society in Transition, as the synthesis of the work of Noboru Karashima on the economy and society of South India in the ancient and medieval period, reaffirms his eminence as a historian and scholar. His 40-year academic engagement with India has not only established methodological framework for studying inscriptions, and for interpreting the data contained in them, but has also contributed to a tradition of Japanese social studies on India based on careful empirical research. The painstaking and time-consuming efforts by Karashima and his colleagues to reconstruct history from inscriptions have borne rich historical dividends. He and his collaborators are currently working on religious movements and the role of the religious organizations called *matha*s, research that is a logical extension of their work on the role of ideas in driving social change.

REFERENCES

Karashima, Noboru (1984), *South India History and Society: Studies from Inscriptions AD 85–1800*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Karashima, Noboru (1992), *Towards a New Formation: South Indian Society under Vijayanagar Rule*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Karashima, Noboru (2001), *History and Society in South India: The Cholas to Vijayanagar*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Karashima, Noboru (2002), *A Concordance of Nayakas: The Vijayanagar Inscriptions in South India*, Oxford University Press, USA.

Sastri, K. A. Nilakanta (1955/1981), *A History of South India*, Oxford University Press.

Ramanayya, N. Venkata (1935/1986), *Studies in the History of the Third Dynasty of Vijayanagara*, Madras; reprint, Gian Publishing House, New Delhi.

Ayyangar, S. Krishnaswami (1919/1986), *Sources of Vijayanagar History*, Madras; reprint, Gian Publishing House, New Delhi.

15 "Commercialization of Padikaval in the Pudukkottai Region," *ibid.*, pp. 155–64.
16 "Nagaram: Commerce and Towns, ad 850–1350."