

BOOK REVIEWS

Maritime Southeast Asia to 1500

BY LYNDA NORENE SHAFFER

ARMONK, NEW YORK: M. E. SHARPE, 1996
XVII + 121 PAGES

This book grew out of a team-taught course in world history at Tufts University. Shaffer believes that “Southeast Asia’s maritime realm is an excellent vantage point from which to watch the events of world history go by” (p. xv). Indeed, the author believes that “a general knowledge of the early history of maritime Southeast Asia should be common knowledge among those who study and teach world history” (p. xv). Southeast Asian specialists would certainly agree with her, and this book could well be used in any world history course. Despite the involvement of the United States in the Philippines and Vietnam, information on Southeast Asia rarely appears in world history courses except in an idiosyncratic and usually fragmented way.

Shaffer relates the emergence of Southeast Asia as an important, integral, and enterprising part of worldwide trade networks more than a millennium before European ships ever sailed on Asian seas.

In the introductory chapter, she gives the reader an idea of the immense size of Southeast Asia, superimposing it on a map of Europe. For American readers, she might have pointed out that from one end of Indonesia to the other, for example, is slightly farther than from New York City to San Francisco. One end of the Philippines to the other is about equal to the distance from New York City to Kansas City.

Chapter two tells about the emergence of Funan, the first kingdom of any distinction in Southeast Asia, which existed from the first through the sixth century around the current Cambodian-Vietnamese border. The kingdom’s interest in maritime trade was primarily as an exchange market for Chinese silk. In this chapter, Shaffer correctly focuses on the indigenous uniqueness of Southeast Asia, in contrast to some who view the area as simply some amalgamation of Indian and Chinese cultures.

Most of the rest of the book is devoted to the kingdoms found in the contemporary nation of Indonesia, for example, Srivijaya on the southeast coast of Sumatra, and Singasari and Majapahit in East Java. Majapahit illustrates the height of these kingdoms, whose wealth and power were based largely on their control of the spice trade. However, this “market became so large, and it offered so many opportunities, that Majapahit could not control it indefinitely” (p. 99). Eventually the royal center was moved to Jogjakarta in Central Java, and an Islamic kingdom known as Mataram was established.

Specialists may quibble with various segments of the book, e.g., Shaffer uses the long out-of-date term *Malayo-Polynesian*, she spends several paragraphs emphasizing the dense populations of some areas of Southeast Asia even though until 1500, Southeast Asia was relatively sparsely populated, and less than the best sources are often cited. In general, however, her juxtaposition of local and global events in explaining the importance of maritime Southeast Asia is successful in filling this particular void in premodern world history. ■

Robert Lawless

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Samskara

BY U. R. ANANTHA MURTHY

NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1978
158 PAGES

The novel *Samskara* has been available in English translation for twenty years and has already achieved some currency in undergraduate courses on Hinduism. This review is therefore less an introduction to this wonderful little story, than a reminder of the pleasures and possibilities in store for students and teachers alike—with the important caveat, however, that the students are sufficiently prepared to fully appreciate the symbolic depths of this richly allegorical tale. Though each reader may find

his or her own meanings, I shall briefly describe how my students and I related the themes of the book to the concepts of classical Hinduism.

The novel served as a perfect vehicle for exemplifying the Hindu notion of the four legitimate aims in life—sensuality, wealth, duty, and liberation (*kāma*, *artha*, *dharma*, *moksa*)—in a way that also dovetailed neatly with the three paths of Hinduism—the Paths of Action, Knowledge, and Devotion (*karma*-, *jñāna*-, *bhaktimarga*)—without becoming mechanical or reductionist in the least. The students in fact became so absorbed in the story and its characters that they frequently forgot the religious concepts we were studying, a compelling reason, I would argue, for the judicious use of literature in any field: they left the class with images of real characters etched in their minds instead of dry abstractions all too readily shed right after the final exam.

The story takes place in a South Indian village in the recent past. The death of a rebellious Brahmin, who had maliciously broken all the