

## 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

caste taboos during his life, threatens to further defile the village in his death. His passing creates a classic double-bind: proper Brahmin burial rites would seem to sanction his deliberately deviant behavior, yet withholding those rites also degrades the entire village. This dilemma provoked my students into a lengthy discussion on the relative merits and demerits (mostly the latter) of the caste system, its ritualistic foundation in the dynamics of purity and pollution, and the path of social duty as a necessary, yet inherently corrupting, form of socio-religious organization. Although seemingly quite alien to modern modes of thought, the students grasped these concepts with surprising alacrity, suggesting that purity and pollution may indeed be universal social categories; less surprisingly, they showed an acute sensitivity to that most conspicuous of moral pollutions, hypocrisy.

The task of solving the village's dilemma fell upon a very learned and ascetic Brahmin, Praneshacharya, who had mastered all forms of Vedantic philosophy. Despite the preponderance of classical allusions, the students often failed to see how neatly he epitomized the path of knowledge (*jnana-marga*), with its narrow and ascetic path toward self-liberation. He is contrasted with the character many students found the most compelling: the rebel Brahmin's common-law wife, Chandri, an outcast prostitute who embodied guileless, semi-divine sensuality (she is constantly compared to the heroine-goddesses of the Puranas). Her alluring presence (*kāma*) intrudes upon the serious yet spiritually and sensually barren life of Praneshacharya, creating the major drama of the story. She also disrupts the other Brahmins of the village by provoking their barely concealed venality (*artha*) through selflessly offering her only worldly possessions, her gold jewelry, to whomever would perform her dead lover's burial rites.

Praneshacharya and Chandri have an unexpected yet inevitable sexual encounter in the woods, laced with all the appropriate Mother Goddess symbolism. This precipitates his leaving the householder stage of life and entering into a transitional, *sannyasi*-like state left unresolved at novel's end. Praneshacharya stumbles upon a village festival, teeming with scenes and imagery from traditional Hindu mythology and iconography. For the first time in his life, he actually experiences many of the commonplaces and grotesqueries of human existence, and finally discovers firsthand—despite his vast and erudite learning—that classic Hindu insight in the ambivalence of human love: that “one part of lust is tenderness, the other part a demoniac will.”

We succeeded in using this story as a springboard for even broader questions concerning the institutionalization of religious experience and the inherent tension between works and grace. For, while the Brahmin's life is ostensibly directed toward liberation (*moksa*), he is totally bound up with the world of duty, duality and religious works (*karma-marga*), wherein “he hoarded his penances like a miser his money.” This is contrasted by grace itself, in the person of Chandri, on whom “no sin ever rubs off.” Metaphorically depicted in the social position of a prostitute, she expresses an all-embracing, non-dualistic acceptance of whatever comes her way. Free of the self/other dichotomy which binds everyone to the world of karma, neither money (*artha*), duty (*dharma*), nor passion itself (*kāma*) bind her to this world: her completely selfless actions, as Praneshacharya knows academically but just doesn't get viscerally, are beyond the bounds of

karma itself. In the end, the saving grace of God, and its human expression in pure devotion (*bhakti*), remains a gift unbeckoned and uncaused. It is neither the result of caste-ridden rituals, nor of goal-oriented, and hence irredeemably dualistic, religious works. While religion necessarily functions in the social world of conventional morality and its established paths to righteousness, it does not, in and of itself, cause the grace of God, the true pure-hearted devotion exemplified by Chandri in all her sensuous innocence.

For the students who are properly prepared, the two main characters in this story served as a fruitful rubric for any number of classical Hindu dichotomies: culture vs. nature, parsimonious restraint vs. spontaneous generosity, high-caste ritual purity vs. low-caste devotional purity, acquired religious knowledge vs. intuitive religious experience, etc.—all bundled together in their respective ‘aesthetics’ of male ascetic renunciation versus female affirmative sensuality. In short, we had more than enough to fill one class-hour's discussion.

Altogether, we found the novel *Samskara* a provocative vehicle for approaching the concepts of classical Hinduism in particular and a supple springboard for exploring themes in comparative religion in general—provided, I should reiterate, that the students have sufficient preparation. The novel, I fear, does not in itself provide such information and thus needs to be properly contextualized by supplementary materials. ■

William Waldron

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