



South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies

ISSN: 0085-6401 (Print) 1479-0270 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csas20>

Shyamji Krishnavarma. Sanskrit, Sociology, and Anti-Imperialism, by Harald Fischer-Tiné

Sukeshi Kamra

To cite this article: Sukeshi Kamra (2015) Shyamji Krishnavarma. Sanskrit, Sociology, and Anti-Imperialism, by Harald Fischer-Tiné, South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 38:4, 845-846

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2015.1082213>



Published online: 12 Jan 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The author is trying to explain the meaning of aesthetics for the local people; how they perceive the object. The chapter 'Speaking of Aesthetics' is general and does not explain the importance of forms and proportions for the statues and objects in Indian art. It is well known that in Indian art, as well as in Himalayan art, there are manuals that indicate the exact proportions and colours to be used for the statues of gods and goddesses, while the sketchbooks used by artisans in Nepal and Tibet have been published. We can understand that for the shape and size of the *mohra* the artisans follow an oral tradition. The question of whether a religious object can be an object of art was discussed by anthropologists and art historians before the opening of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris in 2006: not only a statue, but also a ritual object, can be considered an art object. For the local people, a *mohra* is first a sacred object after the consecration ceremony. The author emphasises that '[i]n the Kullu hills artists work for a village or a group of villages beholden to the same tutelary deity. More correctly, they work for the deity or *devata* who rules over such groups of villages' (p. 83). Here we understand the link between religion, the objects representing the gods, and social life in Kullu.

The last chapter, 'Artisans', discusses the position of artisans in local society but without any solid references to other publications about Indian society. It is mainly about the life of an itinerant artisan, Taberam, who is at the same time a storyteller. More interesting is the 'Epilogue' about the consecration in Kullu of a new temple for a local god (rather than an 'old god' (p. 103). The rituals performed for the consecration of the temple are similar to those conducted for the consecration of the *mohra* and parasol (*chatri*).

The most interesting part of the book is the detailed description of the manufacture of the sacred objects and the rituals surrounding it. The illustrations are superb and help to make the process of manufacturing the objects understandable.

Anne Vergati

Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), Paris, France

© 2015 Anne Vergati

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2015.1082212>

Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Shyamji Krishnavarma. Sanskrit, Sociology, and Anti-Imperialism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014), ISBN 978-0415445542, 228 pp., Rs345.00, pbk.

Harald Fischer-Tiné's compelling biography of Shyamji Krishnavarma forms part of Routledge's Pathfinders series, a series that aims to bring global visibility to South Asia's rich intellectual pasts through the lens provided by biography. It is a classic 'history from below' project, and has a very particular biographical subject in mind. As shaping forces, pathfinders are, the blurb prefacing the list of titles in the series thus far states, 'necessarily cosmopolitan' who 'engage with a miscegenation of ideas that recasts existing notions of schools of thinking, of the archive of a history of ideas, and indeed the very notion of national and regions' limits to intellectual activity'. The figures of South Asian history the series hopes to introduce to the '[i]ntelligent layperson and expert alike' thus are intended to show that national histories are constituted by global exchange, movement, and flow of ideas; in themselves, these figures, the pathfinders, are individuals who are rich demonstrations of this fact, idiosyncratically and differentially. In the case of Indian nationalist historiography, to present biographies of individuals who were at one time or another part of revolutionary nationalism, such as Krishnavarma, is to do the important work of revealing the puzzle that is the anti-colonial nationalist past to be more vast, dynamic, with more players, influences, contradictions, and

impacts than we have presumed was the case. Without overstating the contribution of Krishnavarma to the story of revolutionary nationalism, Fischer-Tiné very ably demonstrates that the former deserves to be included in the category of pathfinder.

Given the frame of reference, the biography is structured to foreground the story of Krishnavarma's intellectual pursuits and their shaping of his views of British colonialism as well as his radicalism. But it is not done at the expense of his lived experience, as a colonial and racialised 'other' for instance particularly in metropolitan London, or at the expense of the contradictions observed in his life between the personal, defined by orthodoxy, and the political, dominated by radicalism. Both, and more, are woven into the narrative of political identity and intellectual production. However, the question towards which the biography is clearly oriented is of Krishnavarma's turn to radicalism and, in particular, his espousal of a politics of violence in the first decade of the twentieth century. Thus although the biography follows a chronological path, it is themed such that Krishnavarma's childhood to early adulthood, in colonial Gujarat through London, is shown to be richly saturated with a diversity of knowledges—from Sanskrit and Paninian grammar on the one hand to Herbert Spencer on the other; replete with syncretic philosophical experiments which such an eclectic background produced (Fischer-Tiné notes for instance that *The Indian Sociologist*, the monthly which was published between 1905 and 1922 and which the colonial government banned, is full of editorials in which Krishnavarma welded themes in the *Laws of Manu* with Spencerian notions, p. 25); and influence as Krishnavarma embedded himself in global anti-establishment and anti-imperial networks. The last couple of decades of his life, spent in France and Switzerland, are similarly treated—revealing his increasing unpopularity with the emerging leaders of revolutionary nationalism and loss of credibility in the same circles which he once dominated as the host of India House in London. As for Krishnavarma's emergence as a proponent of violent method in the struggle for political freedom, it is an elegantly balanced argument that Fischer-Tiné makes when he juxtaposes Krishnavarma's bold propaganda of anti-colonial violence as counter-violence, with his flight from London to the safer clime of Paris in 1907 and the subsequent politics within the expatriate revolutionary movement.

In a brief concluding chapter, Fischer-Tiné considers the bearing that Krishnavarma's life story has on the larger issue of 'Indian modernity' of the turn of the twentieth century. He concludes that in Krishnavarma we witness an Indian modernity that was constituted by the contradictions typical of the colonial episteme: the interplay of the categories of tradition and modernity, which the author admits have only limited value in describing the highly individual and idiosyncratic ways in which eclectic knowledges manifest in the thinking of someone like Krishnavarma; and the similarly complex co-presence of cosmopolitanism and 'parochialism'. It leads him to conclude that Krishnavarma engagement was not a 'real engagement with radical ideas' in spite of all the 'border crossing communication he was involved in'. His was, at best, a 'strategic cosmopolitanism'. If there is one critique I have of an otherwise erudite, scholarly, critical, and engaging narrative, it is this indirect engagement with the subject of Indian modernity, which is more presumed than theorised in the book.

Sukeshi Kamra

Carleton University, Ottawa, ON, Canada

© 2015 Sukeshi Kamra

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2015.1082213>