

Book Review

Raja Serfoji II. Science, Medicine and Enlightenment in Tanjore

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This exciting book is about the enlightenment in the Indian colonial context under the reign of Raja Serfoji II of Tanjore (1798-1832). The author, Dr. Savithri Preetha Nair, an independent scholar based in London, explores cultural encounters in a thriving contact zone, Tanjore (India). Through a journey of seven well documented chapters, the book discusses the early years of the young Raja of Tanjore under the care of missionaries of the SPCK (Society of the Propagation of the Christian Knowledge) and Europeans and Maratha scholars, the role of Tanjore as a center of Enlightenment in south India, attracting curious European visitors, anatomical studies and science of electricity and natural philosophy, and finally travels in and out of Tanjore.

The protagonist of this book, Raja Serfoji II of Tanjore, was educated by the Danish Missionary Mr Schwartz, understood the English language, read English newspapers and had an impressive collection on manuscripts covering the fields of arts, literature and medicine (in Sanskrit, Marathi and Tamil languages), partly inherited from his ancestors and partly collected by him. His library included large collection of English literature on European Enlightenment too.

In the early XIX, the south Indian kingdom of Tanjore, on the banks of the Kaveri (South east India), flourished as a centre of enlightenment, attracting a wide range of interesting visitors (East India Company officials, Christian missionaries, medical practitioners and naturalists). Tanjore was connected to the metropolis of London and the protestant Halle Lutheran Mission, the Tranquebar missionaries and some of the East Indian Company's surgeon-naturalists. All of them contributed to the social network of Raja Serfoji II and to acquisition, production and dissemination of knowledge, culturally enriching Tanjore. Among other important nodes in the social network of Serfoji were Benjamin Torin (1762-1839), William Blackburne (1764-1839), the surgeons William Somervell Mitchell, Thomas Sevestre and Bannatyne Macleod. Missionaries like C.F. Schwartz, John Caspar Kohlhoff (1762-1844) and Danish Kohlhoff. Christopher Samuel John (1747-1813), and a large number of skilled people employed at the palace as scholars, musicians, poets, doctors, gardeners, etc. that contributed to the accumulation of knowledge by the Raja of Tanjore.

In addition, Raja Serfoji II's travels in and out of Tanjore, his curious and cultural pilgrimage, helped to sustain the cycle of knowledge accumulation during his time. During his "curious pilgrimage", visiting Chola country, the pagodas of Trichinopoly (Island of Seringham, Palani, Rameswaram, Madura, Alagiri, Kasi-Rameswaram, Calcutta, Gaya, etc.), the Raja acquired first-hand knowledge of India and its people, something essential for a ruler. The travels had two clear intentions: "discovery" and "pilgrimage."

Unfortunately, after the death of Raja Serfoji II, Tanjore was hardly able to continue as a centre of enlightenment and cultural encounters.

In sum, this interesting book contributes to a greater understanding of the Enlightenment in the colonial context of India through the life and legacy of Raja Serfoji, an unusual and unique man for his times and geographic location. This book will be of interest to academics and students in the field of history, anthropology, cultural and religious studies and Indian cultural studies, history of medicine and science, as well as the general reader.

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198 pp.

\$32.00

ISBN 9780415535045