**Boats of Bengal Eighteenth Century Portraits by Baithazar Solvyns**


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In Indian historiography, visual material has traditionally been discounted as a source of information and their relation to different kinds of memory ignored. No methodology has been evolved to handle such material. Whatever visual material has survived — murals, miniatures and etchings — has been relegated to the narrow field of art history and not been taken note of by social historians as a resource for their work. Even the murals of Vijayanagar and the Nayak period have not been paid much attention. The question of how a historian should look at pictorial representations has not been raised. From early days, the emphasis has been on words, such as inscriptions or dispatches during the Raj. Similarly, in the modern period, photographs of the 19th and 20th centuries are waiting to be studied. The neglect of film studies and the approach to cinema in literary terms that is so widely prevalent in India are part of this continuum. An important dimension of the sources of information has remained neglected.

Old India hands know Robert L. Hardgrave Jr. as the author of *The Nadars of Tamilnadu* (1968). He has, in recent years, shifted his attention to the drawings of the British period in India. The book under review is a kind of a curtainraiser for a larger work he has done in the area of visual material. He looks at the etchings with the eyes of a historian and this could open up a veritable treasure house of information. New insights can be gained into the society of that period. We know that a lot of paintings and related works of the British period remain to be published and studied.

In this book, Hardgrave focuses attention on the Flemish artist Francois Balthazar Solvyns (1760-1842), who was in Kolkata for thirteen years, from 1791 to 1803. Born in a rich merchant family in Antwerp, he came to India planning to make a career as a marine painter. Instead, in Kolkata, he began painting people in different occupations and, in a short while, produced an impressive collection of etchings. What is special about Solvyns’ work is that he took note of the presence of caste and related occupations, providing a systematic ranking in his etchings, each of which carried an accompanying note. So he is looked upon as the first European to recognise caste as a social institution and work on an ethnographic
survey of India. What he has left behind, 250 etchings of the people of Kolkata, is an invaluable visual document.

Hardgrave’s engagement with the oeuvre of Solvyns began quite accidentally. While in San Francisco a friend told him of some etchings he had seen in a shop that specialised in Indian miniatures. Hardgrave saw them and was impressed with the perceptive concern of the artist for the people of India. This came through clearly in his works. Being a scholar specialising in India, Hardgrave pursued this artist and soon came to possess a complete set of his work on Kolkata. Along with associate Stephen Slawek, he started the Solvyns Project and this book is part of that collective effort.

The author says that for him, as a university professor specialising on India, Solvyns has a special interest in what he reveals of India two hundred years ago. In most of the etchings, Solvyns’ portrayal of his subject is its first visual representation. Thus, Solvyns’ work offers a rich source for the historian to understand Indian society. The artist’s viewpoint is frozen in these pictures in the manner in which he selects, arranges and stylises the subjects in such a way that they focus on certain characteristics. In that sense, the artist interprets what he portrays. This is clear from Solvyns’ pictures.

What Hardgrave has done is to reproduce thirty-six etchings (here in black & white), along with the original descriptive text of Solvyns that went with each. For each of this, Hardgrave provides his own commentary. Here, the subject chosen is boats used in the rivers of Bengal. In this book, from the original Paris edition, there is also a self-portrait of Solvyns with three servants in attendance. These etchings have been reproduced from Solvyns’ book Les Hindous Vol. III, published in Paris in 1811. Unfortunately, the reproductions in this book are not sharp. The extensive bibliography increases the value of the book.

The thirty-six pictures reproduced in the book are a valuable resource for understanding the history of riverine transport in Eastern India. In the words of Solvyns, these pictures will give “a competent idea of their navigation”. In addition to the representation of the boats, the people in them and the background reflect that period—the early decades of the 19th century. The format of these pictures, their iconography and composition set the model for the later Company paintings. The author’s annotative notes contextualise the paintings.

The author clarifies that this book is meant to serve as source material and not meant as part of the ongoing debates on post-colonial or post-
modern issues. Therefore, these debates have no place in this book. He studiously avoids coming into contact with this discourse. He says: ‘Work on Solvyns will stand long after the dust has settled on current debates and new issues are engaged”.

A study of Solvyns’ etchings will set the model for similar research on the other visual material from the Raj. Not just etchings, but a lot of photographic material is also waiting to be studied. The name of Linnaeus Tripe, the photographer who operated in India in the later part of the 19th century comes to mind. This will inevitably lead to using early film footage as a source of historical information and that will open up a whole new region for study. New methodologies will have to be evolved. This is indeed a fascinating book that opens up exciting possibilities.

This book is, in fact, part of a larger project on the artist, which Hardgrave has completed and which is to be published under the title A Portrait of the Hindus: Balthazar Solvyns & the European Image of India 1760-1820, by Mapin, Ahmedabad. This will feature the reproductions in colour and will have the same format as the book under review. One looks forward to that.

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