

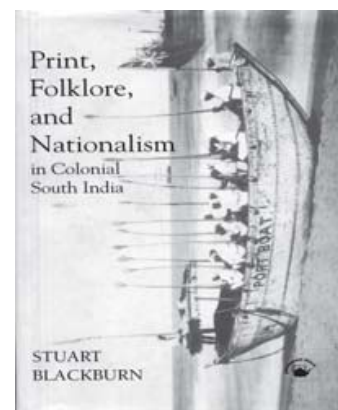
Print, Folklore, and Nationalism in Colonial South India,
by Stuart Blackburn,
Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003, pages 247, Rs.550.

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I have rarely read one other historical book with as much interest and attention as I have done this one. The greatest strength of this book lies in narrating the history of print, folklore, and nationalism in colonial south India in the way a folktale is told by the fireside. The intricate facts spread over the last four centuries are woven the way an artisan weaves beads to make a beautiful necklace. This talent, though not possessed by many authors, of Blackburn is reflected in every sentence, every paragraph, and in every chapter. It is not only a fine example of what history books could aspire to in terms of their capacity to hold the interest of readers, guiding them through a circuitous alley of analytical tours with the confidence and sense of authority that a Navaho chief demonstrates on matters concerning his people. There is meticulous research matched by incisive analysis presented in the most readable prose.

In this book, Blackburn deals with Tamil folktales as they came to be known through the print technology in Madras. On the basis of the little I know on the subject, most features of Tamil folktales have their resonance all over the country, indicating in a way that India is one, although there are significant regional variations. Regarding Tamil folklore, Blackburn notes that they “were expressed in the language of loss, mixing claims of buried history with forgotten texts and disappearing traditions.” (p. 15). Being so, as he rightly points out, they could be a potent symbol of national identity, which he sadly found not happening in south India due, among others, to classical Tamil literature. The latter, according to the author, was superior to folklore in “antiquity, purity and civilization.” (p. 179).

At the conceptual level, he has successfully argued the futility of juxtaposing the oral against the print, or the folk against the modern. He shows how the two can co-exist, complement each other, and how it is possible to demonstrate that they co-existed, rather than the commonplace notion about the former preceding the latter in human history. He actually goes beyond complementarity and speaks of the organic relationship between the oral



and the print. Although this idea is not new in anthropology, I do not remember any important anthropological work that brings out the inseparability between the two as well as Blackburn does in this book. One can, of course, visualise a predominantly oral, or pre-modern, phase in the history of Tamil folklore, but that does not belittle the generalisations drawn in this book on the relationship between folklore and print.

The author also brings out the role of the 'pundit-publishers' in the nineteenth century during the Hindu revivalism as a reaction to missionary activities with or without British government patronage. There is very good content in this chapter that could be of use to those interested in revivalist movements. Not much was known about this till Stuart Blackburn's research unearthed the details.

The role of individual entrepreneurs in shaping the history of Tamil society has also been extremely well brought out in this book. His narrative is so rich that the characters become alive and begin to move in front of the readers. The life history approach in historiography blends imperceptibly with the historiography based on written documents; the former provides life and blood to the body the latter erects.

One of the most important chapters in the book is "Folklore and the Nation: 1860-1880." Although the period under consideration is rather shorter, the exploration he makes on the association between folklore and nation is both able and imaginative. He argues and also demonstrates in this chapter that folklore was at the core of the debate on tradition, modernity and nationalism in nineteenth century India. He writes, "on the one hand, folklore represented what modernity would have to leave behind; on the other, it supplied the materials for constructing a nationalist identity." (p. 145). In his analysis, "printed folklore failed as a vehicle for nationalism... because it is too local, too familiar to serve such a cause." (p. 147). He notes with a sense of regret that the folklore that could emerge as a symbol of nationalism failed to happen due to the 'ambivalent' attitude of Tamil folklorists and nationalists towards their folklore. The Tamil folktales were obviously evaluated on the basis of European values and norms, which was perhaps best exemplified by the life and works of Pandit Natesa Sastri, so very well depicted in the book. The author discovers that folklore in south India was seen by Tamil nationalists as bearing negative qualities like immorality, primitiveness, and backwardness. The image of folklore as pre-colonial, pre-Brahman, and pre-Sanskrit cultural isolate it and lose its relevance under the influence of modernism that emphasises on dates and documents. Such an attitude was further entrenched in Tamil society with more and more Tamils receiving European education at home and abroad.

The author is, however, not the infallible protagonist of the folklore; a discerning eye will not miss the few shortcomings in this book. One such problem with this book is the author's mind-set. He shows, if I may call so, a 'Columbus-complex' in his obsession with 'the first'. I am not too sure how important it is to folkloristics or historiography to discover who first did/said what, who first visited/saw what, or who first published/printed what, but when such a concern is a little too strong, it catches the eye of the readers.

Second, the book generally gives a lot more importance to chronology than most historical works I have read; this is not a weakness *per se*. But one

often gets the impression that it is being done at the cost of content, of which one begins to get the feel only from the third chapter onwards. Although I can imagine the importance of chronology in history, a book on the history of print, folklore and nationalism could do well with less of chronology.

Third, while documenting the history of print in colonial south India, the author tends to be more concerned with fonts and machines than with the series of changes that this technology might have set off in Tamil society. There is particularly no indication to suggest that the Tamils resisted the coming of this technology, although it was part of the consolidation of colonial rule in the south. This might have been a limitation inherent in writing a history of folklore on the basis of documents and life histories, which this book does.

Fourth, one also notices that familiarity with the colonial documents has rubbed certain colonial habits onto the author. This is evident in his retention of colonial spellings of place names and persons in this book, and allusions like 'the Tamil country', which were characteristically British.

Fifth, the boundary of 'folklore' has been, although consciously, reduced to the boundary of 'folktale'. Although the author explains why he has done so, it cannot be the explanation for the usual lapse of folklore studies into folktale studies. I suspect that this is one of the probable reasons why folklore has rarely received the attention and status it deserves.

Finally, let me go back to the central thesis of the book. The book argues that Tamil folklore, which had the potential to emerge as a symbol of national identity, did not do so because its role was occupied by the more respectable classical literature on the one hand, and on the other hand, it was seen by Tamil nationalists with a sense of ambivalence – as a symbol of native culture as well as a symbol of rusticity. In terms of the evidence cited by Blackburn, his arguments are unassailable.

One may, however, argue that the book in itself is a fine document that may be advanced in support of a theory of home-grown Orientalism, by which I mean looking at natives by native scholars in the same manner as the Orientalists would have looked at the Occidentals. There is this unmistakable 'othering' of the native culture by Tamil folklorists or nationalists who themselves constitute the 'Other' of the European scholars and administrators. Tamil nationalists have clearly borrowed the mind-set of the Orientalists to evaluate their own culture. Hence, the immortality, the primitiveness, the backwardness, superstitiousness, the rusticity, etc., of Tamil folklore as seen in the eyes of Tamils nationalists themselves. In fact, the Tamil nationalists, who were evidently typical homegrown Orientalists, had little ambivalence towards their folklore, as the book itself shows, although it does not say so blatantly.

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