

***BILINGUAL DISCOURSE AND CROSS-CULTURAL FERTILISATION:
SANSKRIT AND TAMIL IN MEDIEVAL INDIA***
EDITED BY WHITNEY COX AND VINCENZO VERGIANI

Bilingual Discourse and Cross-Cultural Fertilisation: Sanskrit and Tamil in Medieval India, Whitney Cox and Vincenzo Vergiani (eds). Pondicherry: Institut Français de Pondichéry/École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 2013. €38.00. ISBN: 9782855391298.

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This collection of essays, the proceedings of a workshop held at the University of Cambridge in 2009, is a fundamental contribution to the field of research that studies the interactions between Tamil and Sanskrit in South India. As Dominic Goodall reminds us in the introduction (1), Sanskrit was not the only literary language in premodern India, but it entertained complex relations with local literary vernaculars. This is especially true for the Dravidian-speaking South and, most notably, for the Tamil country, where from early on — when exactly is still hotly debated — there flourished an extraordinarily rich literary tradition. It is the aim of this pioneering book to explore the ways in which Sanskrit and Tamil and their attendant cultural and intellectual worlds ‘fertilised’ each other ‘cross-culturally’ in Medieval India. As the two editors convincingly argue in the preface (vii-viii), to do so involves calling into question modern scholarship’s tendency to compartmentalise the study of Sanskrit and Tamil in two distinct academic domains. Instead, they argue that the joint study of these two languages and related thought-worlds is crucial to illuminate the complexity — and much of the fascination — of the South Indian cultural landscape.

Comprising eleven essays, the book is divided into three sections which are devoted to ‘*belles lettres*’ (5) (parenthetically, the internal coherence of this section is tenuous, as it comprises three rather diverse contributions somewhat forcefully brought together under the section title ‘literary audience and religious community’), to the two contiguous Indian disciplines of grammar and poetics (in Tamil *ilakkaṇam* “grammar”), and to epigraphy. The second section is the largest, as it comprises five contributions, four of which are by the masterminds of the Cambridge workshop (Chevillard, Cox, Vergiani, Wilden; see p. vii).

Within the limits of this review, it is impossible to examine all the essays. Instead, I will focus on three contributions, one for each section. Their scrutiny will suggest some general observations about the book.

Heuristically, all contributions can be divided into two groups: evidence-oriented and theory-laden essays. An example of the former is Takanobu Takahashi’s ‘Is clearing or plowing equal to killing? Tamil culture and the spread of Jainism in Tamilnadu’. While robust evidence suggests that Jainism played a significant cultural role in Tamilnadu and Karnataka, it is unclear how Jainism and local people interacted. In his essay, Takahashi attempts to cast light upon the spread of Jainism in the South. Through a meticulous semantic and lexicological investigation of the occurrence of *kol* ‘to kill’ and related terms in early Tamil literature, Takahashi shows that ‘to kill’ is also used to refer to felling trees and ploughing fields. He then suggests that this extended meaning is significant in that it shows that ancient ‘Tamilis intrinsically had a mentality similar to Jains’ (62), which, then, ‘must have been a critical and desirable factor for Jains to propagate their religion’ (63). The sharp philological work in this essay is fascinating and leads the author to speculate on broader cultural questions, although if his work had been coupled with archaeological and historical finds it would have been more convincing.

Cox's 'From source-criticism to intellectual history in the poetics of the medieval Tamil country' is the essay that addresses theoretical questions most directly. Focusing on the 'long twelfth century' in the Tamil country, Cox attempts 'to trace the common conversation between the scholarship' (115) in Sanskrit and Tamil on the disciplines of literary and dramatic theory. The article is divided in three parts. The first and second provide a detailed investigation of Tamil and Sanskrit sources, in an attempt to chart some of the complex textual interactions which led to the reception of Kashmirian literary theoretical models in the Tamil South. While some of Cox's arguments concerning specifics are not entirely convincing (direct borrowing in the Tamil dramaturgic work *Ceyirriyam* from Abhinavagupta's commentary *Abhinavabhāratī*; Śāradātanaya's use of pseudoeigraphical quotations in his *Bhāvaprakāśana*, a lengthy Sanskrit verse compendium of literary and dramatic theory), his compelling source-criticism is not an end in itself, but is refreshingly geared towards illuminating broader questions about the cultural and intellectual landscape. In the third part of the article, Cox addresses such questions overtly. He does so by ably discussing the applicability to the Indian context of some methodological positions articulated by the historian of political thought Quentin Skinner. While some of Cox's conclusions – especially when they draw too heavily on the questionable evidence of the preceding parts, or when they seem to be too sweeping if compared with the paucity of the evidence available –, fail to fully persuade the present reviewer, his thoughtful and stimulating engagement with theoretical questions commands admiration.

In his 'Legal Diglossia: Modeling discursive practices in premodern Indic law', Timothy Lubin explores the impact of Sanskrit legal language and Sanskritic legal models on South-East Asian and Tamil legal inscriptions. In light of a detailed examination of some representative inscriptions in Old Javanese and Tamil, he demonstrates that there are some close parallels between the South-East Asian and the Indian situation. In showing how Sanskritic legal terminology was adopted and adapted to the local vernaculars, Lubin suggests some trends underlying the larger process by which the legal thought-world of Sanskrit written śāstric models permeated the local unwritten world of legal customs. However, 'tentative' (445), his conclusions are well-put and provide a useful frame of reference for future research.

Anyone doing philological work on premodern India faces a daunting challenge – to make sense of texts for which there is very little (if any) contextual evidence. This dearth has often been lamented, and Dominic Goodall draws attention to it in his introduction (2). Yet, some historical periods fare better than others. And for Medieval South India an ever-growing number of detailed studies have piled up a noticeable amount of historical contextual evidence (see Cox's considerations, p. 150). As Cox notes, 'this scholarship is completely indifferent to intellectual history'; but also, the opposite seems true, namely, philologists interested in broader intellectual questions do not seem to take full advantage of this scholarship. This is at least the present reviewer's impression with respect to some of the essays in this book. True, most essays are wary not to make their claims too boldly; consider the (perhaps excessive) abundance of cautionary remarks, such as 'speculating', 'tentatively' (6) 'these are only speculations' (134), 'largely tentative' (161). Nonetheless, the present reviewer's impression is that there often appears to be too wide a gap between the meticulous textual research and the carefully worded, yet evidentially poorly supported, implications and conclusions that are drawn from it. One is thus led to query whether it may have been possible for some more philological essays (e.g., Vergiani's perceptive exploration of the interaction between the Sanskrit and Tamil grammatical traditions) to articulate more focused and historically grounded results, had they taken fuller advantage of the scant yet available historical evidence. It may come close to asking too much for a pioneering book like this, but it seems fair to suggest that a broader perspective which incorporates historical

and archaeological findings may have helped to illuminate the investigated texts by placing them in some contexts, thereby mitigating the overtly speculative character of some of the suggested claims.

As it should be clear from the above, the book is not for beginners; all articles are written by specialists for other specialists. In addition, several articles begin *in medias res*. While the (few) experts around do not need this, a more reader-friendly approach might have enhanced the readability of the book as well as enlarged its potential readership. To this end, a more complete index, but, in particular, a Sanskrit-Tamil-English glossary might have been a useful aid.

While presenting some of the minor drawbacks detailed above (hyper-specialisation, speculative character, and a certain lack of dialogue with historical sources), this book is a must for all scholars interested in the interaction of Tamil and Sanskrit. It contains a mine of detailed information, and some theoretically stimulating discussions (especially in Cox, Freeman, and Lubin). With its brave if uneasy attempt to navigate the gap between hard-core source-criticism and theory, this book is a great accomplishment in itself and signposts the way for future research.