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Book Reviews : Jackson William. Tyāgarāja and the Renewal of Tradition : Translations and Reflections

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2016-03-08 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: 寺田, 吉孝 メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10502/00005882

Jackson William. *Tyāgarāja and the Renewal of Tradition: Translations and Reflections.*

(Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994.
xvi, 304pp. ISBN81-208-1146-1)

William Jackson is a historian of religion who has devoted his life to the study of Tyāgarāja (1767-1847), by far the best known saint-composer of South India. In his previous book, *Tyāgarāja: Life and Lyrics* (1991), Jackson contextualized the legends surrounding his life and music by investigating the process of canonization of such legends and by linking them to larger sociopolitical changes during and after his lifetime. It also includes English translations of the lyrics of 108 major compositions (kritis) by Tyāgarāja. The work under review is the author's second book on Tyāgarāja, and a continuation of his quest to understand why this extraordinarily influential saint-composer has attained the eminence

and popularity that he enjoys today. While many issues discussed in the first book are given more elaborate treatment in the second, Jackson's scholarly concerns and interests (and perhaps even his personal spiritual involvement) which inform his publications will be better grasped by reading his first book alongside. With these publications, Jackson presents the first serious study to date to interpret the significance of Tyāgarāja as a cultural icon in South Indian society.

The work under review is a book of translations and reflections, as its subtitle rightly indicates. It provides English translations of biographies and other related materials on and by Tyāgarāja in three Indian languages (Sanskrit, Telugu and Tamil), and they will serve as a highly useful reference for future research. The book takes the form of a collection of essays, divided into three parts. Part One (Literary Texts and the Growth of Tradition) opens with a translation of *Naukā Caritram*, a cycle of twenty one Telugu songs by Tyāgarāja and Jackson's analysis of its key imageries such as a silver boat and water (Chapter 1). Chapter 2 provides a translation of five biographies of Tyāgarāja by nineteenth century authors ("early biographies"), most notably Vēṅkaṭaramana Bhāgavatar who was a disciple of Tyāgarāja, and his son Kṛṣṇasvāmi Bhāgavatar. More translations of Tyāgarāja's biographies, this time by twentieth century authors ("later biographies"), are given in Chapter 3. Jackson seeks in Chapter 4 to situate the Tyāgarāja biographies translated in the two previous chapters in the context of Hindu hagiography. Here he presents one of the major assertions of the book that South Indian Hindus' continuing interest in Tyāgarāja's music and life is a form of their adaptive strategy and spiritual response to modern changes toward materialism and secularism.

Part Two ("The Transmission of Tradition") describes the spread of Tyāgarāja's fame and music by his devotees. In Chapter 5 ("The

Spread of Tyāgarāja's Fame and Music by his Disciples"), Jackson sets Tyāgarāja apart from the other two members of the musical 'trinity' (Muttusvāmi Dikṣitar and Śyāma Śāstri) for his dedication in training disciples, and lists the different contexts in which Tyāgarāja's music and legends were disseminated by his disciples. The readers will learn that Tyāgarāja's music was spread through performances and publications of his songs by his disciples (and their disciples), and that *harikathā* (musical discourse) performers were influential in transmitting Tyāgarāja's life stories and legends. A brief description is also given to the Tyāgarāja *ārādhana* (Tyāgarāja's death anniversary) celebrated in Tiruvaiyaru where the saint-composer died in 1847 and the spread of the festival to other parts of India and beyond. Bangalore R. Nāgaratnamāl, a Tyāgarāja's committed devotee who played a decisive role in the development of this festival, is the topic of Chapter 6 ("Obeying the Dream: Nāgaratnamāl and the Veneration of Sri Tyāgarāja"). The first half of the chapter provides a synopsis of Nāgaratnamāl's life, based primarily upon two Tamil biographies by Banni Bai and T. Sankaran, while Nāgaratnamāl's life history is interpreted in the latter half through a series of questions and interpretations by Jackson. Very little is written about the Tyāgarāja *ārādhana*, and the inclusion of its description is not only appropriate for the subject of the chapter but also valuable in filling the gap of knowledge in existing literature, while a full-fledged study on this important festival remains to be undertaken. Unlike the preceding chapters, Jackson utilizes oral sources in Chapter 7 ("Twenty-Century Understandings of Tyāgarāja"). He describes a spectrum of perceptions of Tyāgarāja as collected through the author's interviews with eight scholars, musicians and patrons of music as well as through written sources by prominent musicologists, non-Indian scholars, and Sai Baba, a contemporary

spiritual leader and Jackson's guru.

In Part Three, Jackson offers a series of "reflections on the process of religio-cultural traditions." In Chapter 8, he delves into the seeming contradiction between Tyāgarāja's communal and sectarian background (Śaivite, *smārta brāhmaṇa*) and being a devotee of Rāma (a manifestation of Viṣṇu), and concludes that the expansive and adaptable nature of the *smārta* sect contributed to Tyāgarāja's role of renewing a musical tradition in South Indian history. In Chapter 9 ("Reflections on Tyāgarāja and Tradition"), the author analyzes why Tyāgarāja has been chosen from a multitude of musicians as the most important saint-composer not only for South Indian Hindus but also by others in India to become a national symbol. Chapter 10 ("Tropes for Tradition") examines various ways to conceptualize tradition. Jackson first describes the eleven major metaphors of tradition, including social complementariness, persistence in time, constant rebirth, self-contained system, and a canon, among others, and then introduces Gregory Bateson's cybernetic thinking as a particularly useful tool to explore Tyāgarāja's role in South India, urging readers not to dwell only on human-centered culture and its premises. This chapter reveals more about the author's assessment of dominant concepts and presuppositions in the modern technological world that, according to him, hinder holistic understanding of Tyāgarāja, than about Tyāgarāja or how his music and life have been interpreted in South India. In the concluding chapter of the book (Chapter 11), Jackson rephrases his assertion about Tyāgarāja's role stated in Chapter 4. The author argues that Tyāgarāja as a 'saboteur of history' comforts and appeals to Hindus with his songs in the midst of changes which threaten the Hindu meaning and existence, and by doing so serves as a bridge between late medieval religious ideals and early modern adaptations (p.282).

Although there is no doubt the book is

highly informative and insightful, a few critical observations may be made. First, Jackson's choice of sources appears to influence, if not determine, the contour of his reflections. His heavy reliance on written sources by Brahman (*brāhmaṇa* in Jackson) scholars and musicians and relative indifference to oral sources (excepting chapter 7) and perceptions of non-Brahmans may have resulted in interpretation that could be construed as text-centered and/or Brahman oriented. Jackson is aware of this limitation, and I cannot agree more when he says at the very end of the book, "Without a statistical survey of Tyāgarāja's popularity among different communities in urban and village India it would be impossible to determine his exact status." (p.284). I eagerly await Jackson's future endeavor in this area.

In my own research, I have found that Isai Vēḷāḷar (non-Brahman) musicians tend to interpret Tyāgarāja's life and musical heritage differently from Brahmins though their views are not commonly represented in written sources (Terada 1997:310-312; cf. Arunachalam 1989; Sankaran 1987). I might add here that the Tyāgarāja *ārādhana* in Tiruvaiyaru is not only the largest and most prominent public celebration of Tyāgarāja's music and life but also a site of contestation between Brahman and non-Brahman (mostly Isai Vēḷāḷar) musicians from its inception. Jackson believes that "old animosities and differences are largely forgotten" in the Turnerian 'communitas' during the festival (p. 158), but his statement has the effect of concealing the underlying communal tension.

Jackson's general interest in views by non-specialists of music seems apparent in his references to "folk memory" (p.74-75, 124) and "folk mind" (p.237-238) concerning Tyāgarāja and in his statement to emphasize the importance of "sensitive exploration of what it means that people tend to remember a saint in certain ways" (p.123). Yet the contents of the popular images of Tyāgarāja are seldom

discussed. It is true that Jackson frequently refers to *harikathā* performers and their active role in shaping Tyāgarāja legends and transmitting them to the general public and in fact one of the biographies included in the book was written by a *harikathā* performer (Narasimha Bhāgavatar), but Jackson's examinations of *harikathā* expositions on Tyāgarāja in relation to other written sources are not substantial. The existence of three commercial films based on Tyāgarāja's life (or, more precisely, versions of his biographies in the present century) is mentioned (p.114), but the characteristics of the depictions of Tyāgarāja in these films and their impact on the popular conceptions of the saint-composer are not analyzed. Perhaps, it is unfair to expect such analysis from a book intended primarily to provide translations and reflections based on them, but his references to 'folk memory' without substantial discussion on its content may cause confusion. Perhaps a qualifier as to whose perception of Tyāgarāja it intends to delineate may be in order at the outset.

Another weakness of the book partly lies in its organization, and partly in the lack of balanced integration of translation sections into his reflections. While the translations prove very useful and his reflections offer stimulating insights, they are not necessarily integrated to the degree that produces a book of tight thematic coherence. For example, Chapter 1 may be omitted from the book. An English translation of Nauka Caritram provided in the chapter is valuable in itself, but one may find it difficult to find a thread connecting this chapter and the remainder of the book. More baffling is the analytical break between the first two parts (Chapters 1-7) and the last (Chapters 8-11). In the former, Jackson delineates the development of Tyāgarāja legends or the changes of his image in South India through translations of representative works by its scholars and musicians, whereas in the following part Jackson's ap-

proach shifts dramatically and he offers his interpretations of Tyāgarāja without utilizing much the findings in the two preceding parts (his interpretations of, or based upon, South Indian interpretations). An impression lingers that the richly nuanced South Indian voices heard in the earlier chapters (and Jackson's ears for such voices) disappear suddenly in Part Three. This is not because he cites mostly Western thinkers in this part, but because the interpretations presented earlier are not well integrated into discussion. As the author mentions in the preface, the book is not designed to be read sequentially from the beginning to the end, and readers are treated with a great deal of information and insights in any given chapter read separately. Yet, 'translations and reflections', the two pillars of the present work, should be drawn closer together to present a unified outlook.

The few concerns I have described above should not belittle the value of the book under review. Jackson's courageous attempt to historicize Tyāgarāja as a potent cultural icon by laboriously sorting out existing sources on him is a major contribution to the scholarship of South Asian studies in general. The lucid translations of written sources on Tyāgarāja will no doubt serve as an indispensable reference for students of South Asian music cultures, the majority of whom are not likely to be conversant in all three of the languages translated into English in this book. Jackson's continuing efforts to make such translations available alone should be greatly appreciated, and his reflections will stimulate further contemplation and discussion on Tyāgarāja for a long time to come.

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