Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes 1250-1625

Review Number:
239
Publish date:
Tuesday, 1 January, 2002
Author:
Joan-Pau Rubiés
ISBN:
9780521770552
Date of Publication:
2000
Price:
£70.00
Pages:
443pp.
Publisher:
Cambridge University Press
Publisher url:
http://www.cambridge.org/uk/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521770552
Place of Publication:
Cambridge
Reviewer:
Daud Ali

This impressively erudite, well researched, and eloquently written book by Joan Pau Rubiés analyses the development of Iberian and Italian travellers' accounts of south India over three hundred years. Beginning with the medieval merchant travellers Marco Polo in the thirteenth century and ending with the humanist antiquarian Pietro della Valle in the early seventeenth century, the book in ten detailed chapters traces the course of travel narratives, providing major new interpretations of the more well known narratives figures Nicolò Conti, Duarte Barbosa, Domingos Paes, Fernão Nunes and Roberto de Nobili, as well as treating largely neglected figures like Lodovico Varthema, or previously inaccessible sources, like Antonio Rubino's hitherto unpublished Account of the main things of the kingdom of Vijayanagara (1608). The book provides the most exhaustive account in English of Portuguese travellers in India to date. It will be of keen interest as much to scholars of early modern India, who have been rethinking the dynamics of this period, as to historians of Europe and the early colonial encounter.

At the most general level, the book makes an important and convincing argument, more demonstrably than polemically, that the popularly used paradigm of 'Orientalism', in which European knowledge of the Orient

is seen as a mere instrument of 'power' hopelessly caught up in a solipsistic fantasy of the 'other', is deeply inadequate for any historical understanding of the nature of these accounts. Rubiés eschews the idea that travellers (much like historians) are hopelessly trapped by their own assumptions determined by their class positions, irrational prejudices, or own subjective consciousness. Rubiés opposes these views, in particular the latter position of 'radical relativism', by suggesting a model of 'language games'. This model does not ignore the specific 'interests' and predispositions of the traveller (and indeed, the informer), but rather poses them as domains within which cultural understanding may occur. Cultures are usefully understood as 'language games', rules of communication specific to social situations. Cross cultural representation may then be understood, within the framework of 'translation' - that is, of learning language-games of other peoples.

This perspective allows Rubiés to pose the central problem of his book as 'under what conditions did travel literature become a form of translation'. The answer to this question is dependent on a two-fold contextualisation. First, Rubiés places his accounts within the contexts of both expanding European trading networks in the Indian ocean and particularly with the evolution of Portuguese interests in the subcontinent, and also the empire of Vijayanagara (1346-1565) the predominantly 'Hindu' power of South India during a time when large parts of northern and central India were ruled by independent Muslim sultanates. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Rubiés places his sources within the intellectual and historiographical traditions of both renaissance Europe and early modern India. Though the author has navigated the waters of medieval south Indian history with remarkable perceptiveness, the most valuable parts of the book remain his acute observations about the intellectual contexts and discursive categories operating in his own sources. He brilliantly demonstrates how, for example, Marco Polo's ability to serve a pagan lord is not justified by any separation of politics and religion, but through an idea of providence - that where ever there is power and law there also must be faith. Later, in introducing the Portuguese accounts of Vijayanagar, he points out very perceptively that an obvious, but very consequential difference between the chronicles written at the imperial centre and the historical accounts by the agents of the king in India is the diminished role that the king plays as an actor in the traveller's narratives. It is these sort of observations, everywhere apparent in the book, that will make it a landmark in the study of 'early modern' representations of the Orient.

Perhaps the most important argument the book makes, presaged by its title, is that travel writing in Europe was an important source of the Enlightenment science of 'ethnology'. This bold claim connects travel writing within the larger intellectual and political transformations in Europe between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Crucial is the figure of traveller, independent from direct religious and imperial authority, exercising his rational critical powers to 'translate' the language games of foreign cultures. Rubiés's formulation is quite sophisticated here. He maintains that while the horizons of travellers' discourse were not determined from within, but instead made possible by the legitimising power of changing attitudes among humanist-educated élites, it is also the case that travel literature came to mediate between the philosophical questions debated by humanists, and the 'empirical reality of human diversity which had now become essential to any answers'. By the 17th century travel writing was a powerful voice liberated from economic, religious and political concern, and would become a new authority in the emerging Enlightenment 'science of mankind'.

Chapter by chapter, Rubiés shows that the evolution of travel writing and its contexts was gradual. Varthema's narrative, for example, though positing itself as the creation of an independent and de-contextualised individual, still required a humanist interlocutor. This independent persona was subjected to new pressures by Iberian imperialism, which brought with it new administrative exigencies requiring knowledge production as well as reading publics at home in Europe. But the political context also allowed new possibilities. Rubiés argues that the Portuguese empire builders articulated shifting political identities with local powers which departed from the idealist emphasis of traditional ideologies and which indicated that a new secularly defined space of understanding was gradually emerging in which other cultures could be classified. The travellers accounts, even within the penumbra of empire, deployed an increasingly comparative approach to human diversity, relying on the authority of observation alone order to establish truth claims. In his readings of the famous accounts of Nunes and Paes, Rubiés shows how this vision

acquired chronological depth and addressed fundamental problems of historical interpretation through naturalistic and secular rather than metaphysical frameworks of order. Rubiés sees the 17th century figures of Nobili and Della Valle as exemplifying two different responses to human diversity at the threshold of the Enlightenment, which, while in different camps, both shared a common challenge to the older conventional way of describing behaviours without analysing beliefs.

Rubiés has provided a masterful integration of his sources with the main currents of European thought. Though he provides an extremely complex picture of the European intellectual context, and the role of the traveller's account within it, there is a tendency toward seeing a general shift in intellectual environments from clerical/religious/traditional to secular/scientific/critical. Rubiés' distinctions are often subtle, as in his argument that the writings of the missionary Roberto di Nobili reveal a changed environment within religious discourse which allowed for a new understanding of gentile religions as part of their own cultural systems. But such subtleties aside, one occasionally wonders how convincing Rubiés overall narrative of European thought can really be. Rubiés clearly doesn't see the stated claims of humanist science as a set of ideological claims in their own right, as some have done. Rather, he celebrates humanist scientific values as the most effective mode of coming to terms with 'the fact of human diversity'.

The implicit value judgements of this study are revealed by certain remarks in the author's otherwise commendable and largely sympathetic treatment Hindu and Muslim sources. While finding many cultural similarities between Deccani Muslim and Vijayanagar accounts on the one hand and those of the Portuguese on the other, Rubies nevertheless concludes that the Portuguese had a clearly 'superior' approach to cultural understanding than either Hindus, dominated by mythic 'cyclical time' or Muslims, preoccupied with a jihad centred way of writing history. For the South Asian historian, these images are as unfortunate as they are stereotyped, and despite Rubies commendable attempt to read the Persian and Sanskrit/Telugu sources in translation, don't really tell us enough about indigenous knowledge systems.

But to return to Europe, one wonders why critical approaches to humanism and enlightenment values, now widely debated, have not been addressed, even by way of disagreement, in such a deeply contextualising and sensitive book. There are those thinkers, for example, who have suggested that the rising discourses of empiricism, historicism, humanism and 'enlightenment' in complex ways actually 're-occupied' some of the transcendental roles which they had sought to displace. And like the 'ideologies' from which these currents sought to distance themselves, they too had their own boundaries, coercions, and 'rules' of play. In this respect, Rubies' structural typology for understanding cultural contact is perhaps not radical enough. Though understanding cultures as 'language games' - coherent systems of meaning - Rubies tends to see translation as a universal process, a rational negotiation of 'human diversity'. But can we not gain something important by seeing 'translation' itself as a 'language-game', or more properly, following Foucault, a 'truth game' governed by its own assumptions and rules of operation? The 'fact' of human cultural diversity in this framework would not necessarily be a 'fact' at all, but an a priori assumption coherent within a particular language game. Foucault in his The Order of Things suggested that in medieval knowledge systems difference was not perceived within the framework of self and other, nor the diversity of discrete and incommensurable objects, but rather through a hieratic order of resemblances. Foucault went on to provide a historical account and critique of the 'classical' and humanist system which replaced this order. Though the author may not agree with such methods or conclusions, some treatment of this scholarship, and more importantly, knowledge itself as a language game could open up his material to new perspectives and add another dimension to an already impressive and powerful book.

Other reviews:
[2]

Source URL: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/239

Links:
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1951
[2] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews