

A JeanMarie Proud Compilation !

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Kinship and language

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S. THEODORE BASKARAN

Interview with Thomas R. Trautmann, Professor of History and Anthropology at the University of Michigan.

Thomas Trautmann: "It is striking how much similarity remains in languages as distantly related as English and Sanskrit, in the vocabulary of kinship."

THOMAS R. TRAUTMANN is Marshall Sahlins Professor of History and Anthropology at the University of Michigan, United States, and

is also the editor of the journal Comparative Studies in Society and History.

He came under the influence of A.L. Basham at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, and got interested in Indian

studies. Trautmann's first work Kautilya and the Arthasastra (1971) laid the foundation for his formidable reputation as a

historian. His interest in Indian studies proved enduring, and his second book, Dravidian Kinship, came in 1982. This was

followed by Lewis Henry Morgan and the Invention of Kinship (1985).

About Trautmann's book Aryans and British India (1997), Aram A. Yengoyan wrote, "This is a creative and venturesome rethinking

of issues of race, language and caste in the British colonial understanding of India." His book The Aryan Debate (2007) focusses

on the Aryan-Dravidian discourse. His last book on F.W. Ellis, The Dravidian Evidence (2008), drew a lot of scholarly attention

and has been translated into Tamil. Trautmann has written a number of research papers on subjects relating to India such as the

one titled "Elephants in Ancient India".

His new book, F.W. Ellis and the Madras School of Orientalism (Oxford University Press), is due to be launched in Chennai on

August 19. He was in Chennai in April and gave a talk, at the Roja Muthiah Research Library, on F.W. Ellis. S. Theodore Baskaran

spoke to him about his scholarly pursuits.

What were the formative intellectual influences that led you to India and to Tamil Nadu?

The single most important influence was A.L. Basham's book The Wonder that was India. The American edition appeared in my

college bookstore along with other exciting new works published by Grove Press, and I found it fascinating. Basham's big book,

as I try to show in my foreword to the 50th anniversary edition by Picador, was an attempt to find a new way to write India's

ancient history in the era of decolonisation and independence, and to make a new, non-imperialist relationship for a historian

from the west with India's historians. I took it with me when I spent a year in the University of Delhi. I studied sociology in

the newly opened department headed by M.N. Srinivas, an inspiring time for me

and a department with which I formed a great

attachment. M.S.A. Rao, in particular, was a fine teacher who became a life-long friend. Both lectured on kinship in India,

combining information from fieldwork study of present-day villages with ancient sources, especially Dharmashastra texts; this

combination of sociology and history, which one finds also in the work of G.S. Ghurye, their teacher, and Irawati Karve, made a

long-lasting impression on me. Both Rao and Srinivas were from the South, but at that point I had no direct connection with

Tamil Nadu. What caused your move from Sanskrit to Tamil studies?

The first move was from anthropology, which was my major subject in college, to history. Basham's book convinced me that the way

to come to terms with India was to learn Sanskrit and study ancient history, with Basham, in the University of London. The

kinship lectures of Srinivas and Rao also contributed to this decision. I went to London, to the School of Oriental and African

Studies, and did a Ph.D. in history. Basham himself thought Tamil was essential for ancient Indian history, along with Sanskrit

and Pali, and I absorbed that belief from him. Before leaving London, I made a small start in Tamil, with John Marr.

What are the distinguishing features of Dravidian kinship?

Our bodies contain, in the genes, a record of the deep past, and the words we speak contain evidence of the historic relations

among languages. Kinship has something of that character, too. It is striking how much similarity remains in languages as

distantly related as English and Sanskrit in the vocabulary of kinship: mother (matr), father (pitr), brother (bhratr), sister

(shvasr), daughter (duhitr), son (sunu).

The vocabulary of kinship is very conservative. But even more conservative is the semantic structure of the kinship vocabulary.

In Tamil, for example, the father's brother (periyappa, chithappa) is a kind of father (appa), whereas in English he is an uncle.

Similarly, a mother's sister is a kind of mother rather than an aunt. This feature (called crossness) carries through the entire

set of kinship categories. It has a systematic logic in Tamil and other Dravidian languages that shows the historical relatedness

of Dravidian kinship systems traceable for at least 2,000 years, both through comparative study of kinship systems in the present

and through the documents of the past recorded in inscriptions and texts. The Dravidian pattern of cross-cousin marriage is part

of that systematic logic.

After taking a position in the University of Michigan to teach Indian history, it came to me that what I had learned about

kinship systems when I was doing anthropology and sociology could be put to use

for ancient history. I embarked on a long study

towards a book called Dravidian Kinship [1981], combining historical documents with contemporary fieldwork studies of kinship in

the tradition of Srinivas, Rao, Ghurye and Karve. The research led me to Tamil Nadu.

What is happening to kinship in the globalising world?

"Between the college of Fort St. George and the Mackenzie Collection, there was a network of European and Indian Scholars

producing a distinctive set of historical ideas about language, literature.." Here a publication of the College Press.

In one sense you could say that kinship has never been more important as a way of understanding the world we live in. Charles

Darwin gave us an explanation of deep history that shows [that] all the species of living beings are kin to one another, and

Gregor Mendel explained the mechanism of inheritance. Genetic kinship has become a master narrative of deep history, and the

rapid advances of genomic research have produced an explosion of new deep histories of life on earth that are kinship-based.

We may feel that in our lives the reach of kinship is not as great as it was for our ancestors because kinship now competes with

so many other institutions and affiliations to organise human life. But it is a striking fact of this moment of time that kinship

is seen to be everywhere and to be the key that makes the world intelligible to us.

What led you to Ellis and how has Ellis deepened our understanding of language families, especially Dravidian?

Recently, I have been looking at the study of ancient Indian history in the period of British colonial rule, provoked by Edward

Said's book Orientalism. I wrote a pair of books based on colonial Calcutta [now Kolkata] and Madras [now Chennai]. Working on

the first book, Aryans and British India, centring on Jones and Indo-European, I came to find that F.W. Ellis, Collector of

Madras, had written a "Dravidian proof" as I call it, that is, a demonstration that the languages of South India are historically

related to one another and form a language family, but are not descended from Sanskrit although they contain many Sanskrit and

Prakrit words.

The Dravidian proof was published as early as 1816, long before Bishop Robert Caldwell's magnificent Comparative Grammar of the

Dravidian or South-Indian Languages [1856], which, however, threw the work of Ellis into the shade. The Dravidian proof of Ellis

was one of three fundamental and lasting contributions to India's deep history to come out of the colonial period, the other two

being the discovery of Indo-European (Jones) and of the Indus Civilisation (Sir

John Marshall and his associates, Daya Ram Sahn

and R.D. Banerjee). I wanted to know more about the obscure Ellis and the circumstances that brought forth the Dravidian proof.

Finding letters and writings of Ellis in the British Library, in Oxford University, in the National Library of Scotland and in

the Tamil Nadu State Archives, I wrote the second book of the pair, Languages and Nations: The Dravidian Proof in Colonial Madras”

[2006]. Ellis was a superb scholar and formed connections with the best Indian scholars of Chennai. He planned the College of

Fort St. George at which leading Indian scholars trained Indian students in grammar and law to become teachers for the civil

service recruits arriving from England. These Indian scholars, especially Pattabhirama Shastri, Shankara Shastri and Chidambaram

Vathiyar, plus Mamadi Venkayya of Masulipatam, were part of the network out of which the Dravidian proof emerged.

What we learn from this is that while colonial Madras was a site of the imposition of British power upon Indians, it was also

the incubator of new and unprecedented ideas that came about because Tamil, Telugu, Sanskrit and English were cultivated by

scholars there, scholars who brought together the very different traditions of European and Indian language analysis. They came

together fruitfully to show that the languages of the South formed a distinct language family. This new idea was without

precedent among Europeans or Indians, and it has proven more durable than the colonial connection that produced it. It is not an

accident that it arose in Madras, where the ideal conditions were present.

Please tell us about your forthcoming book, “The Madras School of Orientalism”.

Learning about the Dravidian proof made me believe Madras was the place where the most interesting conversations about Indian

history were occurring in the opening decades of the 19th century, generating ideas somewhat in opposition to the ideas being

put out by the Orientalist establishment of Calcutta. This intellectual ferment was due to the College of Fort St George and

also the Mackenzie Collection, which the great surveyor Colin Mackenzie and his establishment of scholars were making to

investigate the history of South India. Between the College and the Mackenzie Collection, there was a network of European and

Indian scholars producing a distinctive set of historical ideas about language, literature, religion, law and land that were

alternatives to the views coming out of Calcutta.

The Dravidian proof was only one product of this conjuncture, though it was the most spectacular one. I invited a dozen scholars

to explore this phenomenon in a conference on “The Madras School of Orientalism” at the University of Michigan, and the papers

have now been turned into a book, to be published by Oxford.

What is the status of Indian studies in the U.S.?

Historically, the study of India has lagged behind the study of China and Japan in the United States, and that remains the case.

There has been a tradition of Sanskrit and study of Indian religions going back to the 19th century, but in such areas as history,

anthropology and sociology, it was only after Independence that India acquired more than a very limited presence in American

universities. In the 1960s, there was a flowering forth of language and area studies centres devoted to India and its neighbouring

countries that considerably expanded and regularised India's (and South Asia's) place in American universities.

Most history departments in America, for example, will have someone teaching India or South Asia, though mostly in the modern

period. It is a peculiarity of the American pattern that the presence of ancient India is largely registered not in departments

of history but in departments of Asian languages and literatures.

What about Tamil studies?

Tamil literature has made a place for itself in American universities to the extent that Americans have come to appreciate the

beauty of ancient Tamil poetry of the Sangam through good translations. A.K. Ramanujan's book *The Interior Landscape* [1975] was

very influential in that direction as the translations combine scholarship with the sensibility of a practising poet. Ramanujan

taught a generation of students at Chicago until his death [in 1993].

The translations of George Hart of Berkeley with the poet Hank Haifetz, and those by Martha Selby of ancient love poetry in

Sanskrit, Prakrit and Tamil, have contributed a great deal. Teaching materials by George and Kausalya Hart and K. Karunakaran

and others have been invaluable. There is now a small but growing number of excellent younger scholars of Tamil literature in

America, and the same can be said for linguists, anthropologists, historians and historians of religion specialising in Tamil

Nadu.