

Long Jensen

REPORT FOR SCOTT KLOECK-JENSON PRE-DISSERTATION TRAVEL GRANT

My five-week stay in south India was without doubt one of the more amazing experiences of my life. As some of my professors forewarned me, nothing can truly prepare one ahead of time for a place like India. The sights and smells and tastes still linger in my mind. The smiles on the faces of the children were contagious and unforgettable. As a country striving to become a modern developed nation – while I was there, Vajpayee announced his goal to reach this status by 2020 – India is a place rife with contradictions. On the sidewalks of Bangalore or on the air-conditioned travel buses, cell phones went off with no less frequency than they might on a New York subway platform. Cable stations broadcast the Indian-version of MTV, pushing the envelope on the more acceptable sexual mores displayed on traditional Indian movie stations just a click or two away. At the same time, many Indians worked hard all day with only one solid meal as sustenance. The hunger and poverty was everywhere I went, and quite disturbing. I encountered a man sitting on the side of the street in the hot midday sun begging for rupees. He had an advanced case of elephantitis in his leg, which I later learned was a disease of the poor – entirely curable with proper treatment. Experiences such as these marked my initiation into Indian society and culture as much as the follow-through on the research objectives with which I arrived.

In an effort to begin to track thematic patterns in the royal iconographies of several major south Indian dynasties, I visited just over forty temples, palaces, and museums in over a dozen cities and towns. I visited sites related to the Pallava, Cola, Hoysala, Vijayanagara, Nayaka, and Maratha dynasties. This gave me a good general sense of some of the dominant motifs found in the various political cultures spanning one thousand years of south Indian history. Throughout my travels, I had the opportunity to take extensive notes, shoot over 750 photographs, and gather texts and coins related to my project. One of the highlights of my trip was discovering a 220-panel mural of the *Ramayana* at

the Ramaswami temple in Kumbakonam. This temple was built and consecrated by the Nayaka king Raghunatha in the 17th century. To my knowledge, this local version of the epic has not yet been studied. I am presently editing the photos, translating captions, and comparing iconographical motifs as part of my present focus on a genealogy of south Indian temple Ramayanas.

I also closely followed the daily news reports in press and on television. I cut out dozens of newspaper articles pertaining to Hindu nationalism. During the time I was there, the Ayodhya issue flared up again with the death of Mahant Ramachandra Paramdas, the chairman of the committee for the construction of a Rama temple on the ruins of the mosque destroyed in 1992. Angering many in the opposition and coalition parties, Advani and Vajpayee each made public statement in support of Paramdas' vision for the construction of the temple despite the position articulated previously by the BJP that it would not push the issue. With a new round of elections scheduled later this year, some are wondering whether the religion card will be played once again and what that might mean for communal relations. In south India, I observed no real communal tensions save one example of graffiti on a wall that read "Black Day for Muslims." A few Muslims with which I spoke each declared that they felt entirely safe living in side-by-side with their Hindu neighbors.

While I was in India, I also had the opportunity to meet with Dr. S. Sankaranarayan of the Adyar Library and Research Centre in Chennai and with Dr. P. Perumal, conservator at the Saraswati Mahal Library in Tanjavur to inquire about the collections held at each location and the requirements for access to them. Located on the grounds of the international headquarters of the Theosophical Society, the Adyar Library houses 18,000 palm-leaf and paper manuscripts and 30,000 volumes, the majority of which are in Sanskrit. The Saraswati Mahal Library was started in the 16th century under the patronage of Nayaka kings and is considered by many to be the most important manuscript collection in India today. Its Sanskrit collection alone consists of 40,000 manuscripts and 14,000 books. Both facilities offer viewing, reproduction, and transcription services to researchers at very

modest fees. My visits with both men proved very helpful for my preparation for future work at these two prestigious institutions. The opportunity to do some preliminary investigation of resources in India for later research will certainly strengthen my application for a Fulbright award to return next year.

I should mention too that I teach at a high school in Chicago. Last year, I proposed a new course elective in social studies entitled Religion, Politics, and Society that I am teaching for the first time this fall. Besides laying an important foundation for a return trip to India to undertake more extensive research, my trip this summer will prove helpful in a very immediate sense as I share with my students stories, photographic images, and news accounts of India that tie in well with several themes from the course. My teaching on such topics as relations of rich and poor nations, dilemmas over globalization, religious nationalism, and ethnic conflict will be considerably enhanced thanks to my recent travel experience.

Final word

I very much wish to thank the Global Studies Institute and the benefactors of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Award for the generous financial support given to me. Without it, my experience this summer would not have been possible. I only hope that my research will in the future contribute in some small way to the stated values of international understanding and social justice that the award underwrites.