

*The Jungle Kings: Ethnohistorical Aspects of Politics and Ritual in Orissa.* By BURKHARD SCHNEPEL. New Delhi: Manohar, 2002. x, 350 pp. Rs 800 (cloth).

Why are South Asian “little kings” potentially as much a thorn in the side of modern historians and anthropologists as they often were in the eyes of the greater kings whom they ostensibly served? How and why did these rulers exploit ritual as a vehicle to affirm their status and legitimacy? And how may our perspective of little kings affect the more general understanding of dynamic relationships among South Asian kings, their subjects, and other kings?

As Burkhard Schnepel demonstrates in this very readable examination of Orissan “jungle kings” (i.e., polities centered in remote, nearly inaccessible regions that included a large proportion of tribal groups), historical and anthropological perspectives on smaller South Asian polities have developed considerably over the past quarter century. *The Jungle Kings: Ethnohistorical Aspects of Politics and Ritual in Orissa* makes significant contributions to this research in two main areas: the relationships between little kings and greater kings and the political dimensions of ritual.

Following a brief introduction that gives the reader a guide to that which follows, Schnepel provides an excellent comparative analysis and critique of the major models of kingship and the state that have been applied by anthropologists and historians over the past century. It is a well-crafted review, and although I am reasonably conversant with the literature that Schnepel addresses, I found much in it to make me reexamine long-held views.

Having delineated the theoretical context that motivated the writing of this book, the book introduces the special case of Orissa and the history of its little kingdoms. Jeypore emerges as the “paradigm of a jungle kingdom” for which Schnepel reconstructs the dynastic history of the Suryavamshis, the royal dynasty that ruled the kingdom between 1443 and 1950. As is often the case with South Asian little kingdoms, available source material is sparse and that which does exist lends itself more to a reconstruction of “how it might have been” than to a strict chronicle of events. Working within these constraints, Schnepel takes pains in his interpretation of the rise of the Jeypore Suryavamshis to identify and consider alternative scenarios within which to evaluate the source material. Perhaps the dominant theme is the effort made by the Jeypore kings to represent their independence from the Gajapati kings who held sway over most of this part of Orissa. They were able to preserve this independence largely because of the remote hilly jungle of the Jeypore kingdom.

The relative inaccessibility of Jeypore also figures prominently in Schnepel’s examination of the relationships that existed among the Jeypore kings and their own subsidiary kings and chiefs, using the *thātrajas*, or “military governors,” of the Bissamcuttack estate as a case study. Schnepel’s lengthy discussion of a long legal dispute between the Jeypore kings and the Bissamcuttack *thātrajas* strikes a familiar chord—many witnesses, intrigue, forged copper-plate inscriptions, entire generations of litigants. Change the names and dates, and it could be any one of hundreds of cases from Indian legal history. And as is so often true in such cases, one is reminded of Ryunosuke Akutagawa’s story “Rashomon,” in which all of the parties to a murder narrate compelling reconstructions of events that paint their own actions in the best light, are consistent with the evidence, and falsify the statements of the other witnesses. In the Jeypore-Bissamcuttack case, however, the main legal issue was not murder but, rather, the status and legitimacy of the *thātrajas* in relation to the Jeypore kings. By the end of the discussion of the case, the reader may be forgiven if he or

she wonders if the main points could not have been made with less emphasis on the court records or perhaps even have been assumed true. Most readers will hardly be surprised to find that the Jeypore kings used the courts to seek a decision binding the Bissamcuttack estate to them, or that the Bissamcuttack thāstrajas fought equally hard to have the court declare their estate to be the legal equivalent of the kingdom of Jeypore.

The final two chapters examine political aspects of ritual and royal patronage. Schnepel first argues the thesis that the Orissan jungle kings sought to legitimize their rule in the eyes of indigenous populations, most of whom were tribal groups, by integrating the worship of local goddesses with that of Hindu deities. Second, he explores how the royal patronage of Durga and the *dasarā* festival acted to integrate the Jeypore kingdom and sort out the dynamic relationships between subordinate and greater kings.

Absent from the book, but sorely needed, is a concluding chapter in which Schnepel places his examination of jungle-kingdom politics and ritual in the larger context of recent research on little kingdoms elsewhere in South Asia and returns to his theoretical essay on little kings to draw the main theoretical implications of his study to the reader's attention. The lack of such a chapter detracts a bit from the book's value.

*The Jungle Kings* was originally published in 1997 as *Die Dschungelkönige: Ethnohistorische Aspekte von Politik und Ritual in Südorissa/Indien* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner). The very readable translation is the work of Robert Parkin. Although clearly aimed primarily at South Asian specialists in history and anthropology, the book is recommended to general readers interested in Orissan history. The chapter entitled "Little Kingdoms and the State in India" would make an excellent assignment for a class or seminar on South Asian kingship.

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