

**V. V. Haridas, *Zamorins and the Political Culture of Medieval Kerala*. pp. 366. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited. 2016.—
Reviewed by Olga Nowicka (Jagiellonian University, Kraków).**

The work by V. V. Haridas extensively covers the topic of the small kingdom of Kōlīkkōṭu (Calicut) located in north Kerala, in the period of time from the 12th to the second half of the 18th century. The book thus examines the span of 500 years when the Zamorins were autonomous rulers—i.e. 1200–1766—from the rise of the kingdom until its fall due to the invasion and subsequent subjugation by the Mysorean ruler—Haider Ali.

The study broadly discusses the political culture of medieval Kerala by focusing in particular on the Zamorins of Calicut. This particular area and the period in the history of Kerala seems to be relatively underrepresented in modern scholarship to date. The only English monographs worth mentioning, that earlier undertook a study of the subject in a detailed manner, were the *Malabar Manual* by William Logan (1887) and *The Zamorins of Calicut* by K. V. Krishna Ayyar (1938). A few other works have been published in Malayalam, however, they are not easily accessible to readers and, as the author states, they do not contribute much more new information to the topic.

The originality of the study presents itself in the use of previously unstudied original source documents, such as several volumes of unpublished palm-leaf manuscripts—*Kōlīkkōṭan Granthavari*—constituting a part of the palace archives of the Zamorins, which

document the political and royal establishments of the rulers of Calicut. Certainly, gaining access to these materials, which were difficult to obtain, required a lot of effort and labour as did their further analysis, demanding exceptional professional skills in dealing with the manuscripts. The comprehensive use of these source texts—so far studied only to a limited extent by K. V. Krishna Ayyar and N. M. Nampoothiry—resulted in the significantly improved monograph about the history of the kingdom of Kōḷikkōṭu.

In his book Haridas presents a thorough examination of running the state by means of a complex “government machinery”. The author explores in depth the different ways the Zamorins exerted authority through various circuits of power, such as local chieftains, magnates and members of the royal family. He reveals to the reader the elaborate network of interrelations between the king and the functionaries working for the kingdom’s administration. For this purpose he makes use of the original documents from the palace archives that list in detail the retinues of particular functionaries. Thus the critical approach towards previously unstudied indigenous source materials allows him to clarify the political mechanisms in the kingdom of Kōḷikkōṭu in this period of almost six centuries. By examining the political strategy of the ruling house, the author sheds light on the nature of the state in medieval Kerala under the reign of the Zamorins. In his study Haridas offers the reader a full picture of the character of kingship in all its aspects—ritualistic, symbolic and political.

The book contains ten chapters. The author starts with the presentation of sources and perspectives used during the preparation of the monograph. Documents, either of indigenous origin as well as foreign accounts, were consulted by Haridas. The main textual basis for the book was the already mentioned *Kōḷikkōṭan Granthavari*, which constitutes a series of about seventy volumes of palm leaf manuscripts and two hundred volumes of paper records written mostly in Malayālam script (with the exception of a few which were in Kōleḷuttu script). The content of those documents falls into two main categories—part of them describe incomes and expenditures, while the rest give details about

various royal rituals and festivals. A few more *granthavaris* (chronicles) served as a valuable source of historical data for the author of the book. These were *inter alia* family records of a Brahman house known as Vaññēri (*Vaññēri Granthavari*) and *Perumpatappu Svarūpam Granthavari* of the Cochin royal family. Pieces of Maṇipravālam literature and *sandēśakāvya*s (message poetry) were another relevant source of history, as well as *Kēraḷōlpattis*, *cāvēr* songs belonging to the folk tradition, the *Kēraḷōlpatti Kiḷippāṭṭu*—a poem narrating the history of the Zamorins, and some accounts of foreign travellers, such as Ibn Battuta, Abd er Razzak, Duarte Barbosa, Ludovico di Varthema, John Huyghen and Van Linschoten, among others.

On this textual basis the author starts his monograph with an investigation concerning the rise and growth of the kingdom of Kōḷikkōṭu, taking into account the socio-economic landscape of medieval Kerala. In the following chapters he examines the nature of kinship and lineage, the scheme of succession as well as the political structure of the kingdom. Subsequently, Haridas analyzes in a detailed manner the strategies for legitimizing power through various rituals (ritualization of the king's quotidian routine), symbols, lavish royal festivals and relations with prominent Hindu temples. He also discusses the issue of the royal patronage of art, literature and scholarship as a means to control the ideology of the elite class and enhance the splendour of the court and royalty. The last chapter of the book is dedicated to the institution of *cāvērs*—suicide militia squads—designed to challenge the Zamorin hegemony.

To conclude, the book by V. V. Haridas is an in-depth insight into the nature and history of the small kingdom of Kōḷikkōṭu and hence it is a significant contribution to regional historiography. It comprehensively fills the *lacuna* in present-day scholarship in the field of research under discussion. The monograph *Zamorins and the Political Culture of Medieval Kerala* is certainly worth recommending to all who are interested in medieval South India and especially to those who are particularly interested in the history of Kerala.