Ramesh has done an admirable job of chronicling Gandhi's special closeness to the natural world in *Indira Gandhi: A Life in Nature*. The reader emerges with a vivid sense of a person who was in communication with her natural surroundings from an early age. Unfortunately, we get only a superficial sense of how she reconciled her passions with the chosen path of her life. We are left begging for a more inclusive perspective.

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Text and Tradition in South India. By Velcheru Narayana Rao. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016. 494 pp. ISBN: 9788178244723 (cloth, also available in paper and as e-book).
doi:10.1017/S0021911818002875

Velcheru Narayana Rao (or VNR, as he is known) is the preeminent scholar of Telugu studies in the American academy. His works, composed singly and with a stable of collaborators, now form the small library of monographs and translations that practically constitutes the field's literature. What's more, in over thirty years he has produced a crop of insightful essays that bring the substantial body of Telugu traditions to bear on the broad questions of South Asian and literary studies. Among them are the fifteen pieces collected in *Text and Tradition in South India*.

Covering over 900 years of South Indian literary traditions, the essays' stand-out themes include "concepts of author, text, and the historicity of text cultures," as well as "orality and literacy" and "the quiet impact of colonial modernity on Indian text practices" (p. 11). This broad thematic and chronological compass is cut by VNR's attentiveness to the social and ideological dimensions of the texts. At the same time, he aims to oppose reductive analyses, holding literature to be fundamentally multivocal—susceptible to a variety of interpretations, possessing lives and afterlives, and thus distinct from and "unfettered by … overpowering authorial sermon" (p. 416).

General introductions to premodern Telugu literature come in chapters 1 ("Multiple Literary Cultures in Telugu: Court, Temple, and Public") and 4 ("Coconut and Honey: Sanskrit and Telugu in Medieval Andhra"). Chapter 1 definitively maps major modes and tensions in precolonial Telugu literary cultures rather than comprehensively cataloging authors and works. VNR heeds especially the traditions' narratives about their beginnings in the eleventh-century South Indian courts and subsequent moments when poets resisted or renovated these earlier paradigms. Chapter 4 highlights Telugu's relationship with Sanskrit. In particular, VNR traces the ways Telugu adopted Sanskrit poetry and grammar, and alludes to how it ultimately "acquired a status similar to that of Sanskrit in preceding centuries" (p. 166). This tension between Sanskritic paradigms and other modes in Telugu is a broader preoccupation in the collection.

Chapters 2 ("Notes on Political Thought in Medieval and Early Modern South India," co-authored with Sanjay Subrahmanyam) and 5 ("Multiple Lives of a Text: The *Sumati Śatakamu* in Colonial Andhra") demonstrate the contribution of Telugu materials to the study of South Indian political culture. Chapter 2 leverages the sizable corpus of poetry on *nīti* (pragmatic politics) and shows it to be a necessary archive for premodern political history. In chapter 5, VNR picks up the argument's modern threads. He asks how

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an anthology of cynical poetic maxims for small-time political functionaries (village scribes or *karaṇams*) was co-opted as a moral grammar for children by colonial authorities. This essay stands out as much for its rich literary-historical method as for its historical contributions: VNR examines the work's manuscript and print incarnations to reveal the contours of the culture that would encounter colonial modernity. In so doing, the chapter incidentally offers a short course in the reading protocols for premodern Telugu poetry.

Chapters 3 ("*Purāṇa* as Brahminic Ideology") and 13 ("*Purāṇa*") push beyond text-critical approaches to the *purāṇa*. Instead VNR defines the genre by its place in a larger society of texts (p. 139) and the ideological and epistemological frameworks it uses to structure narrative traditions. Chapter 13 in particular complicates philological debates over the genre's being oral or textual. Eschewing either/or propositions, VNR suggests that *purāṇa*s (and Indian texts more generally) stride the line: better to recognize that the "recorded" (or written) text is actualized by the tradition (author/performer or *paurāṇika*, and audience) to form the "received" text of living performance and interpretation (pp. 444–45).

Three middle chapters attend to Ramayana traditions and questions of gender. In chapter 6 ("When Does Sītā Cease to Be Sītā: Notes Toward a Cultural Grammar of Indian Narratives"), VNR juxtaposes Sanskrit Ramayanas with Telugu retellings (ranging from oral traditions to modernist short fiction) and illuminates how the Ramayana functions as a language for articulating Indian value systems. Chapter 7 ("A *Rāmāyaṇa* of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu") concentrates on oral Ramayana traditions among Brahmin and non-Brahmin women and how the songs voice strategies for the singers' persistence and resistance within hierarchies of gender and caste. Standing as rich appendices to this essay are the two previously unpublished translations of Ramayana songs in the volume's last two chapters ("A Day in the Life of a Housewife: 'Sītā Locked Out'" and "Urmila Sleeps: A Ramayana Song that Women in Andhra Sing"). Chapter 8 ("The Politics of Telugu Ramayanas: Colonialism, Print Culture, and Literary Movements") concludes the published Ramayana cycle. It shows how the Ramayana assumed a new "textual integrity" under the influence of colonial philology and therefore was subject to novel forms of devotion and critique.

Chapters 9 ("Epics and Ideologies: Six Telugu Folk Epics") and 10 ("Texture and Authority: Telugu Riddles and Enigmas") examine how communities construct and are constructed by the genres of caste epics and riddles respectively. Especially provocative here is the argument linking riddle and prophecy (and not just a prophecy in riddling form): both, VNR suggests, presume and produce communities that can decipher them.

Chapters 11 ("Buddhism in Modern Andhra: Literary Representations from Telugu") and 12 ("The Indigenous Modernity of Gurajada Apparao and Fakir Mohan Senapati") concentrate on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Telugu literature's reception of colonial modernity. Chapter 11 details how non-Buddhist writers deployed Buddhist narratives to construct and critique Indian nationalist identities. Chapter 12 challenges the tendency to identify certain novelists as social reformers. VNR's closer readings find instead skepticism toward the promises of reform and deeper sympathies with precolonial traditions. But readers should look to VNR's wider corpus for a more complete characterization of the "indigenous modernity" invoked in the essay's title.

Delivered in clear and direct prose, the arguments in *Text and Tradition in South India* invite novel readings, would be a boon to classroom discussions, and suggest further avenues of inquiry into South Indian literature's performative and social dimensions. Furthermore, VNR's theoretical provocations—such as "the text writes the author" (p. 198), the "recorded/received" dyad, and the interest in "indigenous modernity"—merit further elaboration and interrogation, as well as more direct engagement with wider debates in historical and literary scholarship. In all, the breadth and depth of

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VNR's work is staggering. I can only hope that in collecting these essays, this volume will make the bounty of VNR's scholarship even more accessible.

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The Skull of Alum Bheg: The Life and Death of a Rebel of 1857. By Kim A. Wagner. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xxix, 288 pp. ISBN: 978019087023 (cloth, also available as e-book).
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In *The Skull of Alum Bheg*, Kim Wagner tells a compelling story of the 1857 Indian uprising embedded in a macabre account of the fate of the skull of one of the rebels. Wagner sets his narrative not in the usual sites of Delhi or Lucknow, but in the remote station of Sialkot in the Punjab, where large contingents of both British and Indian sepoy troops were posted. The work does not venture outside the military side of the revolt, which Wagner regards as the "impetus" for the larger rebellion (p. 74); as a consequence, the activities of the sepoy participants take center stage. Throughout, Wagner endeavors sympathetically to understand the motives of the rebellious sepoys, as well as the fears of the beleaguered British residents of Sialkot as they confronted the unfolding tragedy of the summer of 1857. The skull itself, which came to light in an English pub in 1963, provided the stimulus for the book when its current owners, uncomfortable with this "thing" in their house, solicited Wagner's opinion as to what to do with it (p. xxi).

The setting in Sialkot gives familiar events—from the greased cartridges to the initial outbreak at Meerut and on through the widening circle of rebellion—a fresh perspective. Using standard archival materials together with the few existent indigenous accounts, notably those of Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the less well-known Shaik Hedayut, Wagner, in a crisply written narrative, shows the reader how a remote garrison became caught up in rebellion, and how the sepoy Alum Bheg, allegedly a "principal leader," paid for rebellion with his head, severed from his body (p. xix). Inevitably, Sialkot vanishes from the story for pages at a time as Wagner explores the larger issues that shaped discontent. Of the famous cartridges supposedly greased with polluting cow and pig fat, he argues that the sepoys' actions "were shaped by the fear of being ostracized—by their brothers in other regiments and by their families back home" more than by the composition of the grease itself (pp. 40, 43). More generally, all change of whatever sort "represented the same basic fear: that under British rule no one would be able to maintain their religious and ritual purity" (p. 60). This emphasis on religion, Wagner argues, made the rebellion appear not as a political choice, but as a just struggle fought to "preserve the moral order and fabric of north Indian society" (p. 80).

As the uprising spread across northern India following the fall of Delhi, Wagner turns his attention to Sialkot, where distance secured a fragile peace for several months. As with the sepoys' fears, so too does Wagner illuminate, from private letters, the ominous sense of foreboding of the town's white residents. Some fled, while others stayed until it was too late; some urged conciliation of the mutinous sepoys, while others demanded implacable violence. In the end, sparked by an outbreak in nearby Jhelum, Sialkot's sepoys rose on

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