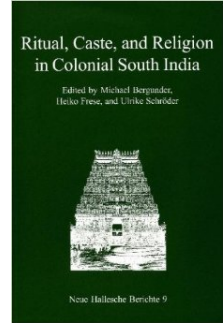


Ritual, Caste, and Religion in Colonial South India, edited by Michael Bergunder, Heiko Frese, and Ulrike Schröder

Neue Hallesche Berichte 9 | Halle: Verlag der Franckeschen zu Halle, 2010 | 386 pages | ISBN: 978-3-447-06377-7 (softback) €15.80



Some years back the historian Ganapathy Subbiah in an address to the Indian History Congress titled “Daksinapatha: Where Does the Path Lead Us?” noted that historical writings which treat Tamilakam as a distinct and exceptional territory in the subcontinent owe this tendency to the writings of missionaries and philologists of the nineteenth century.¹ The volume under review, an outcome of the conference, “Ritual, Caste, and Colonial Discourse in South India,” held in Heidelberg in 2008, tries to reinforce that argument by devoting overwhelming emphasis on the Tamil region. Eight out of the thirteen essays deal with “Tamil” in a colonial “South India” (two other essays on Tamil deal with colonial Southeast Asia and Jaffna) that in fact, of course, used several other languages—though Tamil along with Telugu together formed the majority language zones in the erstwhile colonial Madras Presidency. The arrangement of essays under “The Tamil context” along Saiva Siddhanta, Ritual, and Caste lines is arbitrary and clearly does no justice to any of these categories as the essays presented investigate the interplay of caste, religion and ritual in colonial south India. The essays of Andreas Nehring and Michael Bergunder focus on Saiva Siddhanta religion in colonial Tamilnadu. The former underlines the performative approach drawing from Postcolonial Studies as a useful method to understand different identity positioning in colonial South India while the latter examines the writings of Nallasvami Pillai in articulating the universal religion for Saiva Siddhanta.

Ravi Vaitheespara’s essay examines the discourse on caste and ritual by Maraimalai Adigal. Drawing theoretical inspiration from Talal Asad’s *Genealogies of Religion*, Vaitheespara argues that Maraimalai Adigal’s deployment of Saivism and Saiva Siddhanta as a form of Tamil nationalism points

¹ Ganapathy Subbiah, “Daksinapatha: Where Does the Path Lead Us?,” in *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 67th session (Calicut: Indian History Congress, 2007) 1–24.

to a new understanding of Saivite practices. Straddling such works as *Tamilar Matam*, *Cativeriyarum Poli Caivarum*, *Pantaikkala-t-tamilarum ariyarum*, and *Vellalar Nakarikam*, Vaitheespara reconstructs the subversive history of caste articulated by Adigal where caste was presented as indigenous to Tamil society. However this indigenization of caste was part of Adigal's larger project of ethicizing caste in the Tamil region and subordinate to it. In the schema of forging a Tamil caste, Vellalar interest and hegemony is maintained in a pseudo-democratic spirit. For Vaitheespara the reconfiguring of caste hierarchy by Maraimalai Adigal with Vellalar at the top is a paradox especially so when Adigal remained a staunch critique of caste discrimination based on birth. Vaitheespara attempts to answer this paradox by pointing to Adigal's patrons who largely comprised Vellalars from Jaffna and Tamil diasporic community in Malaysia. While for Vaitheespara Maraimalai Adigal's project emerges in the context of opposition to "Aryan Brahman" hegemony, it is necessary also to locate the same in the context of and in relation to lower-caste articulations in Tamil society.

Peter Schalk's essay examines the role of Arumuga Navalar in sustaining the pre-colonial traditions of Saivism, especially the rituals based on Agamic texts and puranic prescriptions in the wake of Christian missionary activities in nineteenth-century Jaffna. Suggesting that Arumuga Navalar can be viewed, in Gramscian terms, as a traditional as opposed to an organic intellectual, Schalk surveys divergent images of Navalar painted by different groups of people.

The section on ritual comprises three essays. Ulrike Schröder's essay locates Robert Caldwell's missionary activities, especially his controversial work *The Tinnevelly Shanars*, in the context of reorganization of mission work in Tinnevely and the accompanying conflicts with the local dominant castes. Republished in 1850 as part of Society for the Propagation of the Gospel's series, *Missions to the Heathen*, Caldwell's book is representative of missionary discourse on India especially from the perspective of an Evangelical concept of religion. Describing the religion of Shanars as "devil worship" or demonolatry quite distinct from Brahmanical Hinduism, Caldwell set the trope for the missionary agenda of conversion. The (Evangelical) theological premises of Caldwell's understanding of the religion of Shanars, as shown by Schröder, raise important questions regarding scholarly understanding of Caldwell's project especially as "missionary orientalism." Schröder calls for a careful consideration of the relationship between Evangelical conceptions of religion and Orientalism. The understanding of Caldwell's project as "mis-

sionary orientalism” by scholars working on South India may largely be due to his *A Comparative Grammar of Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages* (1856), a major work on South Indian languages. Intellectual history is still its infancy in South India where scholars privilege particular works of individuals to the neglect of others.

Mary Hancock’s essay deals with missionary activities of American women of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Tamilnadu between 1870 and 1920, especially through the writings of Grace Stephens, an Anglo-Indian superintendent of the mission work. She examines the ideas of domesticity and femininity in zenana mission work of the understudied American Methodists. Drawing on Colleen McDannell’s *Material Christianity*, Mary Hancock focusses on material mediations in the zenana work in Madras which involved interaction between Hindu and Christian artifacts (bibles, tracts, songbooks), landscapes and buildings (domestic space, homes).

Torsten Tschacher’s essay on Tamil-speaking Muslims in colonial Southeast Asia attempts to make a connection with South India where the links are rather tenuous. Therefore the essay appears an odd one in the collection.

C.J. Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan provide an ethnographic and anthropological account of agraharams in Tamilnadu inhabited by Vattima Brahmins, and in particular Tippiirajapuram. Agraharams were sites of power and exclusion exerted by Brahmins over other castes for a long period of time in the history of Tamilnad and thus stand as metaphor for their hegemony. In the wake of modernization, the political economy of Brahmins transformed from agrarian landlords of rural background to urban based professional employment. Brahmins started migrating from rural areas leaving behind their settlements like agraharams which stand today as sites of their symbolic power. Fuller and Narasimhan recount their fieldwork experience and analyze the data they gathered from Tippiirajapuram. Despite histories of migration, the Vattima Brahmins retain connection with their villages precisely due to their identity being defined by their village roots. This takes the form of sponsoring temple renovation in the villages, which Fuller and Narasimhan examine in Tippiirajapuram. Apart from physical movement, migration entails a gamut of attitudes and practices. The essay confirms the commonsense understanding of Tamil Brahmin migration to urban areas in the wake of modernity, but does little to examine what this migration entails given their longer histories of rural domination.

The articulation of subaltern communities through the journal *Oru Paica Tamilan* founded by Iyothée Thassar in Tamilnadu during the early twentieth

century is the subject of G. Aloysius's essay. *Tamilan* was launched by Iyothee Thassar in 1907 in the context of debate on subaltern self-identification. While *paraiyan* was a preferred category in the activism of Rettaimalai Srinivasan, Iyothee Thassar's *tamilan* opposed it in order to challenge and transcend the existential reality. The latter unpacked the category of *paraiyan*, *panchamas* as attempts at Brahminical identification of the subalterns and developed alternate identification of *tamilar*/Dravidian, *adi tamilar* and Purva Buddhists with all the positive and progressive attributes of equality, inclusion and casteless nature. This was achieved by Iyothee Thassar through his hermeneutical manoeuvres with ancient texts and traditions. While the critique and reconstruction attempted by Iyothee Thasar remained largely conceptual without any corresponding large scale political mobilization, the legacy was taken over in 1926 when *Tamilan* was re-launched. However, the changed scenario crisscrossed with several other developments in the politics of the subcontinent in general and Tamil society in particular which *Tamilan* had to contend with as far as subaltern self-identification was concerned. Aloysius elaborates on these changes from the conceptual to the concrete and demonstrates the oscillating belongings and articulations of the subalterns.

The focus on middle castes in the hierarchy of castes is taken up in A.R. Venkatachalapathy's essay "More Kshatriya than thou!" This debate over the claim to Kshatriya status was fought by the Nadar and Vanniyar castes during the early twentieth century. In response to the census operation of the colonial state and the implementation of normative Sanskritic categories in the enumeration process, Nadars and Vanniyars sought higher status by inventing their caste histories. However in the process they also contested each others' claims to Kshatriya status and this is reflected in the individual works on caste histories and the journals they founded. These two castes were physically apart yet challenged each others' claims. Delving into vernacular sources so far not consulted by scholars is a refreshing attempt by Venkatachalapathy, but an exhaustive presentation makes the main argument opaque.

The section on the Telugu context carries essays by Heiko Frese, Vakula-bharanam Rajagopal, and Velcheru Narayana Rao. While Frese examines the discourses of identity in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial Andhra from Viresalingam-backed journal *Satya Samvardhani*, Rajagopal analyzes the writings of Kasibhatta Brahmayya Sastri, a traditionalist and conservative who vehemently opposed the social reforms advocated by Viresalingam. The theme of social reform dominated the pages of *Satya Samvardhani* in a subtle way based on reason and common sense. Social

reform was advocated not always by attacking the Brahmanical religious tradition but also by creatively interpreting them for contemporary needs. In the process, the identity of Brahmin was emptied, thus opening up spaces for power struggles between discursive formations. Resisting the social reform movement, a failed case of cultural nationalism is the case of Brahmayya Sastri. In the literature of social reform movement on nineteenth-century India, Rajagopal's essay is significant, for it provides us a "counter" example of resistance to the agenda of reform. Reading Brahmayya Sastri's *Upanyasa payonidhi*, he has presented a "mentality" at work that defended Hinduism against the critics and directed the criticism at Christianity and reformist Brahmoism. This is particularly relevant in contemporary India where cultural nationalism is propagated at the expense of addressing the hierarchy and concerns of lower orders of society.

Narayana Rao's essay on multiple lives of *Sumati Satakamu* in colonial Andhra highlights the power of Orientalism and colonial knowledge-forms in understanding premodern texts and traditions. The epistemological shift in knowledge forms engendered by colonial modernity is evident from the way the concept of *niti* was understood as morals, thereby inaugurating a frantic search for appropriate traditional works to be prescribed as textbooks in schools. Narayana Rao investigates the content of *Sumati Satakamu*, probable readership, oral (Adi Sarasvati Mudranalayamu edition) and literary (C.P. Brown edition) features of the text, and debates on authorship. The argument presented is that the contemporary popular understanding of *Sumati Satakamu* as a text on morality stem from the re-working of it during the colonial period. Spelling errors like "alredy" (244) and irregularity in the spelling of names like Keshub Candra Sen (297) could have been avoided with tighter editorial work. The text of the first appendix on the debate between T. Velayuda Mudaliyar and N. Chidamabaram Iyer, on the message of Ramalinga Adigal from *The Theosophist*, hangs in the air without any relation to the essays presented in the volume.

Despite these minor errors, the volume is a useful compendium of significant scholarship on colonial South India.

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