

RE-VISITING THE 'NARRATIVES OF VIOLENCE' IN THE LITERARY CULTURES OF EARLY TAMIL SOCIETY

Article Particulars:

Received: 01.1.2018

Accepted: 05.01.2018

Published: 20.01.2018

ABEY THOMAS

*Ph.D Candidate, Centre for Historical Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India*

Abstract

After a long period of coexistence, there was an intense power struggle between Sramanic groups and Puranic Hindu sects. In contrary to the existing scholarly assumptions, these conflicts were not taking place in the realm of culture alone where Jain- Buddhist groups had been reviled for being alien to the Tamil cultural ethos and its language. On a deeper analysis we can see significant ruptures in the terrain of economy as well. As peasant society expanding on its grain frontiers, it faced acute challenges from non-peasant, warrior communities. In an ironical reversal of roles, some of these warrior 'tribes' themselves were the followers of Jain religion. Due to the growing ruralisation of the society, the contemporary laity was too poor to feed the monks and to support the elaborate establishment of mendicants. This led to further intensification of conflicts over resources. Since, Sramanas have left no accounts of these conflicts of their own; we have to rely on the texts like *MattavilasaPrahasana*, *Bhagavadajjukam*, *Periyapuranam*, and the *Tevaram*. They all were telling this story from the side of bhakti religions. Clearly, the repertoires were profoundly one-sided and often partisan in their reflections. The question is how could someone construct a pattern from these one-sided narratives? This study argues that this conflict also needs to be seen in an ethical context. The absence of any 'claim of moral superiority over their rivals' by the victorious (which were mostly the Saiva sects) could clearly suggest the regression of absolute ethical standards in the early medieval Tamil society. There was a pervasive presence of violence in the texts and traditions in this period. This paper aspires to unravel the contours of 'historical reality' submerged within these narratives of conflict.

Keywords: (Sramana-Narratives of Violence- Saiva sects- Bhakti Religion, Early Tamil Society)

Introduction

After a rather long period of coexistence, there was an intense power struggle between Sramanic groups and Puranic Hindu sects. In contrary to the existing scholarly assumptions, these conflicts were not taking place in the realm of culture alone where Jain- Buddhist groups had been reviled for being alien to Tamil cultural ethos and its language.¹ There were deeper ruptures in the terrain of economy as well. As peasant society was expanding its grain frontiers, they faced stern challenges from non-peasant and warrior communities.² Interestingly, some of these warrior 'tribes' themselves were the followers of Jain religion.³ Due to the growing ruralisation of the society, the laity was too poor to feed the monks and the mendicants. This led to further intensification of conflicts over resources. Since, Sramanas have left no accounts of these conflicts, we have to rely on the texts like *MattavilasaPrahasana*, *Bhagavadajjukam*, *Periyapuranam*, and *Tevaram* hymns. They all were telling this story from the side of the bhakti religions. Clearly, they were telling a one-sided story of this conflict. The question is how one could make a pattern out of these one-sided narratives.

Contending for Power and Patronage

The standard historiographical view assumes that once upon a time Jain-Buddhist sects were very influential forces in the Tamil society. There were Jains and Buddhists among the kings, bards, merchants and also among the warriors. Later, when bhakti religions began to assert themselves, there was a fierce conflict for power and patronage. In the end of the conflict, Sramanas had to retreat to their hilly abodes and finally they perished from memory and history altogether. According to some of these influential narratives, there were raging tensions between Sramanic groups and bhakti religious followers on the question of their rootedness to the Tamil culture and language, utility of their self-torturing practices, and also their irreverence to the Vedic and Brahmanical textual traditions.

As we try to re-examine the textual narratives of this conflict more closely, a new picture of changing social relations emerges out in clear terms. The general decline of trade and the emergence of land as the main economic resource through land grants can be seen as the socio-economic context of this conflict. As Burton Stein has argued, the Tamil society in the Pre-Pallava period was marked by the social tensions

¹ See, Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Sramanas against the Tamil way: Jains as Others in Tamil Saiva literature* in *Open boundaries: Jain communities and cultures in Indian History*, ed., John E Cort, (Albany: State university of New York press, 1998)pp., 163-187

² Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*, (Delhi: OUP, 1980), p.76

³ T.V.Mahalingam, ed., *Mackenzie Manuscripts: Summaries of the Historical Manuscripts in the Mackenzie Collection*, Vol.1 (Madras: University of Madras, 1972), pp.76-96

between the cultivating classes and non-cultivators who inhabited forest and hilly regions⁴. And when peasantry began to expand their social base, they entered into an inevitable conflict with non-peasant groups⁵. The Brahman-Peasant alliance which could be seen hostile to the non-peasant warriors, were the crucial social base of the *Saiva* movement. The summaries of the Mackenzie manuscripts clearly show that Jains had relationships with Kurumabars and other such warrior groups and they were often persecuted for such affiliations⁶. There were similar literary references for such affiliations as well. One such evidence comes from Cilapatikaram where there was a description of 'hill Kuravas' welcoming deified Pattini cult⁷.

One could find a steady thread in the Mackenzie Manuscript about the Kurumabars, who were once powerful rulers and followers of Jain religion. According to the intermittent narratives, they had hatred towards Vellalars and Mudaliyars which brought ruin on them⁸.

The anti- townie attitude of the Saiva texts can be explained in the context of these changing power relations of the society. The *Śramanaic* sect enjoyed notable patronage among the trading groups. The caricature of this relationship appears in the following conversation in Mattavilasa:

*"The monk inhaling: The wonderful bounty of our lay-brother merchant Dhanadasa surpasses that of all other houses! From his alms what a meal I have of fish and meat, so pleasant its colour, smell and flavour! Now I shall return to the royal monastery."*⁹

At certain other instances, Saivastories adopt a conciliatory tone towards merchant communities as well. The following stanza from Periyapuram shows this clearly:

*In that city, of that clan, the community's chief merchant was he: a man of limitless wealth, well established in prosperity; chief most quality of bondage to the lord of the matted locks adorned by the pale moon. He was famed in this sea-girt world as one firmly established in the habit of readily giving whatever they wanted without saying, "I have it not" to the devotees, whoever they were,*¹⁰

The Saiva attempts to define the physical space of a city in the new terms need to be seen in this context. Appar sings for instance:

*"The unholy town where no temple stands, the town where men do not wear the holy ashes, the town which does resound with sacred song, the town that town is no town, it is mere wilderness."*¹¹ Though, the anti-urban attitudes of the Saiva sects resonate with the growing fanaticism in their belief, it is not often a consistent opinion. The contingency of meeting the everyday needs seems to shape the contours of their outlook. One could easily find many such *Saiva* stories; for instance, in an interesting story we could see how Cekkilar was compelled to invent a logic to reason with the act of gambling if it helps to feed the devotees of Siva.¹²

Tales of Trickeries and Fanatic Violence

The anti- *Śramanic* polemics of *bhakti* religious sects are seemingly intended to conceal the deeper conflicts over power and patronage. This conflict has to be seen in an ethical context as well. As the narratives assume the characteristics of a mythology, the stories are replete with the instances of miraculous curing and consequent conversions. In this case, one might wonder seeing the absence of any 'claim of moral superiority over their rivals' by the victorious (which were mostly the Saiva sects). This clearly suggests a systematic lack of absolute ethical standards in the society. It is also pertinent to note that the earlier period could be characterised by the period of polemical engagements which were intended to prove the doctrinal supremacy of competing religious groups (as epitomised by the Manimekalai, a partisan Buddhist work). When we see the changing social dynamics in favour of *bhakti* sectarian groups, there were clear attempts on the ground to settle their differences through physical means. The Jain's attempt to set fire of Sambandar's residence and the Saiva's revenge on it and many similar stories reveal the intent of actual physical violence¹³. Some of the more fierce narratives on violence seemed to resemble the modern day street fights. It is arguable whether the descriptions are metaphorical or real. This does not, however, deny the pervasive presence of the cultic violence and its fanatical following in this

⁴ Burton Stein, Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India, op.cit.,p.76

⁵ Ibid.,p.73

⁶ T.V.Mahalingam, ed., Mackenzie Manuscripts, op.cit.,p.76

⁷ IlangoAdigal, The Cilapatikaram, (Trans)RamachandraDikshitar, (Tirunelveli: The South India SaivaSiddhantha Works Publishing Society, 1978)p, 320

⁸ T.V.Mahalingam, ed., Mackenzie Manuscripts, op.cit, p. 77

⁹ MattavilasaPrahasana; the farce of the drunken sport, edited and translated from the Sanskrit and Prakrit by Michael Lockwood & A. Vishnu Bhatt, (Madras: The Christian Literature society, 1981),p.61

¹⁰ G. Vanmikanathan and N. Mahalingam, ed., PeriyaPuranam: A Tamil Classic on the great Saiva Saints of South India by Sekkizhar (Chennai:Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1985),p.342

¹¹ Indira Viswanathan Peterson, Poems to Siva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints(Delhi: MotilalBanarsidass Publishers, 2007), p.149

¹² G. Vanmikanathan and N. Mahalingam, ed., PeriyaPuranam: op.cit., p.438

¹³ C.V. NarayanaAyyar, Origin and Early History of Saivism in South India, (Madras: University of Madras, 1974),pp.127

period. As the imaginations could only be drawn from the concrete and actual historical premises, there were objective social conditions for the existence of potentially violent socio-religious groups such as Kapalika's and Pasupatas.

Let us discuss some specific narratives for instance, Appar, a pivotal figure in the *tevaram* trio was once a Jain saint, later when he wished return to the Jain faith (as the story goes, Saivism failed to restore his lost eyesight) he was allegedly killed by his own associates, Sambandar and Sundarar.¹⁴ There were accusations of violence and counter-violence on both sides. Following conversation in the play *Mattavilasa* show the playful side of the accusations. This is what Kapali (a character in the play) says; "Look Mahesvara. Hear this rogue who calls himself a monk stealing my alms-skull and then raising a hue and cry! All right, I'll shout too! Violence to Brahmins! Violence to Brahmins!"¹⁵ The cultivation of violence became so pervasive, as it began to affect every aspect of life. Also, the violence has found its reflections in the beliefs and practices. This seems a sharp contrast to the earlier epoch where mercantile insistence on peace was prevailed. In the age of *bhakti*, the devotion itself turned out to be a fanatical act. The *Nayanar* stories, for instance, tell us about the instances of devotee giving away wife to an ascetic who asks for her and then chop up his relatives when they objected.¹⁶ In a similar account, a devotee kills his son because a Sadhu asked him to and then cooks his son and sits down to eat him.¹⁷ On the face of it, these violent acts are bizarre and devoid of any moral context. While violence has pre-historic roots in Hinduism,¹⁸ from the vantage point of this study, explanations of violence could be found somewhere else. As suggested earlier, the decline of trade and towns began to drain the material basis of the monasteries which resulted in a widespread decline of morality and ethos.¹⁹ The certain injunctions such as excluding non- Jain sects from availing the benefits of monastic institutions and advise for Jain- laities against entertaining non-believers²⁰ reveals the emergent tensions on sharing social goods. At the same time, the social crisis opened up a new form of violent expression in the Saivaitic imaginations. Interestingly, this violence is expressed in many subtle ways. In an interesting expression of this conflict, one can see that devotees were advised to provide Saivaitic mendicant food and other goods even when they were languishing of famine. The failure to do this would invite a call for violence of its own kind. In one of such story, "a devotee chopped off the head of everyone in the family because during a famine²¹ they ate the food which he had set apart for Siva temples."²² The acts of violence were premised on the fanatical devotion to the lord Siva. The *Saiva* stories, for instance, tell us that "someone chopped his wife's head because she refused to wash the feet of the slave of a Siva who used to be his servant." The violence occurs in a similar account where "a one, Cola King chopped his queen's nose because he mistakenly thought she had smelled a flower that was meant for Siva's Puja."²³ All these stories clearly suggest that at the time of a socio-economic distress, the unquestionable submission to the authority structures was a cultural necessity for extracting surplus from the peasants and the artisans.

Conclusion

While concluding, it is pertinent to say that these narratives of conflict were aimed to create an 'Other' identity that was pivotal to the consolidation of the self-conscious 'Hindu' identities in the early-medieval period. The narratives often assumed symbolic and dialogic functions at certain contexts where there was no physical presence of *Śramanic* sects. To quote an instance, when the texts like *Keralolpathi* and *Kerala Mahathmyam* were composed there were no *Śramana*'s present in the Kerala society. Yet, the stories had an apparent intent and inspiration to preserve and keep alive the memories of conflicts

¹⁴ The account on the Appar's killing by his own associates is absent in the standard Saiva stories. An interesting twist in the story, however, occurs in the Summary of the collection of Mackenzie Manuscripts. According to the local legends centred on the Jain temple in Tirunarungondai, a Parswanatha image, locally known as Appandar, is carved in relief on a big boulder. The local tradition says that When Appar came to this place, he lost his eye sight. On praying to the Jain god he was restored his eyesight on the condition that he was to be reconverted to Jainism. Due to his reconversion, he was believed to have been thrown in to a lime kiln and killed by Sambandar and Sundarar. "The stone relics in the temple of Parswanatha or Appandathar are, as pointed out, representing the incidents connected with the story of Appar."

T.V.Mahalingam, ed., *Mackenzie Manuscripts*, op.cit, pp.XLIV, 77

¹⁵ *MattavilasaPrahasana; the farce of the drunken sport*, edited and translated from the Sanskrit and Prakrit by Michael Lockwood & A. Vishnu Bhatt,(Madras: The Christian Literature society, 1981),112

¹⁶ G. Vanmikanathan and N. Mahalingam, ed., *PeriyaPuranam*, op.cit.,pp, 344-345

¹⁷ Ibid, pp.360-362 D. Dennis Hudson, *Violent and Fanatical Devotion among the Nayanars: A Study in the PeriyaPuranam of Cekkilar* in *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*, ed., Alf Hiltebeitel,(Albany: State University of New York press, 1989), p. 386

¹⁸ See , Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*,(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976)

¹⁹ In one of the hagiologies of Vaisnava saints, an interesting parallel to these Saiva stories could be found. Tirumangai, a prominent Alvar saint, is said to have stolen a golden image of Buddha from a *Vihara* in Nagapattinam to pay for renovating the Ranganatha temple at Srirangam. See, T. N Ramachandran, *The Nagapattinam and Buddhist Bronzes in Chennai Museum*,(Director of Museums, Government of Tamil Nadu:2005)p, 19

²⁰ R.N.Nandi, *Religious Institutions and Cults in the Deccan C.A.D. 600- A.D. 1000*(Delhi: MotilalBanarsidass ,1973),p.77

²¹ G. Vanmikanathan and N. Mahalingam, ed., *PeriyaPuranam*, op.cit.,pp, 428,429

²² D. Dennis Hudson, *Violent and Fanatical Devotion among the Nayanars*: op.cit., p.374

²³ Ibid.p.388