



Caste System During Vijayanagara Empire

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Abstract

The Greek and Muslim writers (Ibn Khurdaba and Al Idrisi) have stated that the number of castes in India is seven. Alberuni enumerates a list of sixteen castes as existing in India in his time. The Smritis of the period indicate the existence of many mixed castes (mi'sra or Samkara) also. Kalhana states that the number of castes was sixty-four. Though the writers of the Smritis tried to bring in all the communities (by styling them as mixed castes) in the fold of the Chaturvarnya yet all their efforts dwindled on account of the existence of the three religious systems by the side of Hinduism, namely, those of Buddhism, Jainism, and Veerashaivism respectively.

Key Words: Caste system during Vijayanagara Empire

I. Introduction

The Brahmins in Karnataka assumed an important position in the fabric of society. The Kadambas were Brahmins. Later the Rajagurus of the Rayas of Vijayanagara also included two of the eminent Brahmin personages of the day, namely, Vidyaranya and Vyasaraya'. Besides, Brahmins must have been appointed as ministers in the State. Alberuni states that Brahmins were styled as Istins; and that they were discharging their duties in the Agraharas and other seats of learning. As Shankaracarya and Alberuni observe, the Brahmins pursued professions and duties which were not intended for them originally. Even Brahmin physicians were honoured equally. The main privileges of the Brahmins were the exemption from taxation, mainly in the case of Brahmadeya lands, and exemption from capital punishment, a fact which is corroborated by the accounts of Alberuni and Bouchet. Brahmins were allowed to migrate from one province to another.

The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries witnessed the rise of a schism among the followers of Ramanuja due to a difference in their interpretation of Prapatti (surrender). Some held that the devotee had to exert himself to win the grace of the Lord, while others thought that the Lord's grace by itself conferred salvation on the soul that had entered the path of surrender.

The position of the first school, Vadagalai (northern branch), is commonly summed up in the phrase Markatakisoranyaya, the rule that the young monkey clings to its mother with an effort, and that of the second school, the Tengalai, is called Marjarakisoranyaya, the rule of the kitten which is carried by its mother in her mouth. There are other differences between the two schools, one of them being a decided preference for Tamil as against Sanskrit on the part of the Tengalais, The southern school looks upon Pillai Lokacharya as its founder.

He was the author of eighteen esoteric treatises, and had to leave Srirangam with the sacred image during the period of the Muslim inroads. He found an influential expositor in Manavala Mahamuni, the next great teacher and writer in the southern school. The leader of the northern school was Vedanta Desika. He once hid himself under a mass of dead bodies in Srirangam on the occasion of a Muslim incursion and escaped to Mysore until the storm blew over. However, he was poet, philosopher and man of affairs'.

Another development in Vaishnavism sect based on the Bhagawata was the rise from the close of the thirteenth century of a number of post-saints whose popular songs stirred the life of Maharashtra as those of the nayanars and the alvars had stirred the Tamil country centuries before. The earliest of them was Jnaneshwara, popularly called Dyanandeva Dnanoba a pupil according to some accounts of Vishnuswami, who was a dualist and founder of a sect of his own. Jnanneshwara was the author of an extensive work in Marathi verse on the Bhagwad Geeta. His tone is Advaitic, though he also lays great stress on Yoga; he was also the author of many abhangas of hymns". The movement begun by him continued through a succession of saints to Tukaram, the contemporary of Shivaji'.

Vaishnavism continued to be one of the dominant forces influencing the life of the people. Occasionally the cult especially that of Radha, tended to degenerate into erotic excesses. This is particularly true of the followers of Vallabhacharya, a Telugu Brahmin contemporary of Chaitanya. He was born in Banaras,

wrote several works in Sanskrit including a commentary on the Vedantasutras and become the founder of a system called Suddhadvaita which exalted bhakti above knowledge.

He is said to have vanquished Smarta scholars in public debate at the court of Krishnadevaraya". The acharyas of the sect were known as Maharajas and lived luxurious lives. The highest ambition of his followers was to become gopis and sport eternally with Krishna in his Heaven, an ideal which in practice degenerated into gross eroticism".

Further, disputes between rival sects sometimes flared up with unusual violence. Nevertheless, Vaishnavism continued to be, in general, a noble and sweet influence on life. The Rayas of Vijayanagara were great patrons of Vaishnavism; in 1556 A.D Sadashiva, at the request of Ramaraya, gave thirty one villages to maintain the temple of Ramanuja and the institutions attached to it at Sriperumbudur

The history of Shaivism during Vijayanagara rule, we must note that by the side of the pure school of bhakti represented by the three saints of Devaram and Manikka Vasagar, there existed other types of worshippers of Shiva whose tenets and practices are gruesome and repellent to modern taste". Such were the Pasupatas, Kapalikas, Kalamukhas and others whose presence in considerable numbers in centres like Kanchi, Tinuvorriyur, Melpadi and Kodumbalur is attested by inscriptions and literature from the seventh century onwards. Smearing the body with ashes from a burning ghat, eating food in skull, and keeping a pot of wine, were some of the common practices of the Kalamukhas; and some these sects, if not all, were addicted to the worship of the female principle, which often degenerated into licentious orgies".

The practice of the devotee offering his own head as a sacrifice to the goddess is shown in the sculpture and literature of the age of the Pallavas and Cholas". In the Deccan, under the Chalukyas of Badami and the Rashtrakutas of Manyakheta (Malkhed) both Shaivism and Vaishnavism were flourished creeds. Magnificent temples were built at Badami, Pattadal, Mahakuta, Ellora and other places archakas (priest) were imported from the Shaiva acharayas on the banks of Ganges, and daily worship and periodical festivals in these temples were richly endowed. At the same time the performance of Vedic sacrifices was continued, vratas (religious vows) were observed and danas (gifts) made.

The worship of Kartikeya attained such prominence in the Bellary region in the tenth century that two lapovanas were dedicated to him as the supreme deity, a development initiated by some teachers from Bengal. In the Andhra country also, where Buddhism had flourished in great strength in the early centuries of the Christian era, there came about a strong Hindu revival. Besides the famous shrines of Kalahasti, Daksharama and Srisailam, the temples of Mahasena at Chebrolu, Humkarasankari at Bidapura, and Mallesvara at Bezwada became important centres of pilgrimage.

Mathas grew up and were occupied by monks who fed the poor, tended the sick, consoled the dejected and setup schools for the education of youth, and in the process many Buddhist shrines and viharas were turned to Hindu uses'.

Hinduism has always been a house of many mansions, and the following description of the Arab geographer Al-Edrisi, who wrote at the beginning of the twelfth century basing himself on earlier writers, may well be taken to apply to whole of the Deccan from the tenth to the twelfth centuries. Among the principle nations of India there are forty two sects. Some recognize the existence of a Creator, but not of Prophets; while others deny the existence of both; some acknowledge the necessary powers of graves and stones and other worship holy stones on which butter and oil is poured". Some pay adoration to fire and cast themselves into the flames. Others adore the sun and consider it the Creator and Director of the world. Some worship trees, others pay adoration to serpents which they keep in stables and feed as well as they can; believing this to be a meritorious work. Lastly there are some who give themselves no trouble about any kind of devotion, and deny everything".

Two developments in Shaivism which occurred in the twelfth centuries in the Tamil country and in the Deccan deserve particular mention. The first is the development of the Tamil Shaiva Siddhanta philosophy based on the Agamas. The Agamas are first mentioned by Sundaramurti, and the Tirumandiram of Tirumular is the earliest work to reflect the theology of the Agamas. Agamic terminology is also found in the writing of Manikka Vasagar, who frequently speaks of the Agamas are revealed by Shiva and openly expresses his dislike of the Vedanta, by which he means the monism of Shankara. But the first definite formulation of the philosophy of the Tamil Shaiva Siddhanta was in the work of Meykandadeva, a pious Vellala who lived early in the thirteenth century on the banks of the Pennar River, south of Madras.

He is reputed to have received instruction from Paranjotimuni who was sent down from Kailasa especially for that purpose. His Shiv-Nana- Bodam, a translation into Tamil verse of twelve Sanskrit Sutras from the Raurava-agama, is looked upon as the fountainhead of the dogmatics of the system.

The extensive philosophic literature that sprang from this work has already been reviewed. The progress of discussion led to the growth of different schools within the fold of the Shaiva-Siddhanta. But in the main the system sought, like other philosophies of religion, to determine the relation of God, matter and the soul. It declared that matter and souls were, like God, eternal. The absolute through its 'grace-form' is forever

engaged in the rescue of souls from the bondage of matter and the three saints which defile their purity. As body and mind together form a unity so God is the soul whose body is the universe of nature and of man.

He is not identical with either. He is not their substance but he dwells in them and they in him. Advaita is not Oneness, but inseparability. To realize this union is the high calling of the soul. It is for the Guru or the preacher to let in the light, but Shiva is the source of all enlightenment, sole embodiment aspiration. The system transcends caste and the ritual and calls for inner devotion. According to one writer, contentment, justice and wisdom are the flowers of worship",

The other development in Shaivism also based on the twenty eight Shaiva Agamas, was the growth of Vecrashaivism or the Lingayat cult in Karnataka and the Telugu country Basaveshwara, the Prime Minister of Kalachuri Bijjala, King at Kalyana 1156 A.D, is usually regarded as the founder of the sect Lingayat tradition avers that the sect is very old and was founded by five ascetics, Ekorama, Panditaradhya, Revana, Marula and Vishvaradhya who were held to have sprung from the five heads of Shiva. Basaveshwara, they say, was but the reviver of the faith; but we know for a fact that the five ascetics named were all contemporaries of Basaveshwara, some older, some younger.

The early history of Veerashaivism is therefore still somewhat uncertain. Two features of the sect, however, the prominent place held by monasteries, and the more or less complete social and religious equality among the sectarians have been held to be due to the influence of Jainism and Islam. Lingayats regard Shiva as supreme and must worship only him; hence the name Veerashaivas, stalwart Shaivas. They must also worship each own chosen guru.

Each Lingayat, man or woman, carries a linga about his person, usually in a silver or wooden reliquary suspended from the neck. Reverence is paid by Lingayats to the sixty-three nayanars of the Tamil country whom they recognize as elders (Puratanas) and to seven hundred and seventy later saints among whom are included Manikkya-vasagar, Basaveshwara, and his chief disciples the Aradhya Shaivas of the Telugu country differed from the Lingayats in some respects. They followed Mallikarjuna Panditaradhya, a contemporary of Basaveshwara, in refusing to accept the latter's rejection of the Veda and renunciation of caste. But the relations of the Aradhya Shaivism with Lingayatism were friendly, and both joined together in the fourteenth century in resisting the inroads of Muslims and in preparing the way for the foundation of Vijayanagara

Under the Rayas of Vijayanagara all types of religion found encouragement, and most of the famous temples of South India were enlarged at this time, particularly by the addition of the large gopuras or entrance towers and corridors and mandapas. A few temples were altogether rebuilt to a new integral plan, like that of Madura under Tirumal Nayaka (1623-1659 A.D.). The periodical festivals in most of these temples were also richly endowed and brought together people from all classes of society including groups of peripatetic merchants and traders.

The festivals of the capital city of Vijayanagara, in particular the Mahanavami which is nine days festival in October, were occasions of great display which have been described by many foreign travelers who had occasion to witness them. Their accounts leave little doubt that there was widespread slaughter of buffaloes and sheep as sacrifices to the goddess hook swing and other bad practices of a similar character"

The early history of Buddhism in South India and its decline in Andhradesa, where it had flourished in the early centuries A.D., was introduced by Yuan Chwang, and this decline proceeded further after his time. The renaissance Hinduism of the period begat the worship of the Buddha at Amravati as an incarnation of Vishnu and seems likewise to have converted many other Buddhist centres into Hindu shrines.

In the Tamil country, Buddhism declined rapidly as a result of the activities of the Hindu saints and reformers which we have noticed in this present chapter, but it lingered on feebly in different parts of the country. Under the Cholas there were Buddhist settlements in Negapatam on the east-coast and at Srimulavasam in the west; and Buddhism was considered sufficiently important for some scenes from Buddha's life to be represented in decorative panels in a balustrade of the great temple of Tanjore.

The ancient Velgam Vehera on the banks of the Periyakulam tank near Trincomalee in Ceylon was remodeled and considerably extended, and renamed Rajaraja Perumballi early in the eleventh century; a large life size limestone image of the Buddha and an inscribed bronze lamp stand are among the finds in the Vihara area clear evidence of the active interest of the great Chola monarch in the spiritual well-being of his subjects in Ceylon. An important work of Tamil grammar, the virasoliyam composed in Virarajendra's time, has a Buddhist scholar for its author.

One section of Kanchipuram bore the name of Buddhakanchi to a relatively late date, and a Buddhist monk from one of the monasteries there sang the praises of a Hindu ruler of Eastern Java in the fourteenth century

In the north-west of the Deccan also, new viharas were coming up on behalf of Buddhism late in the ninth century. Thus, in 853, a monk from Bengal built a great monastery in Krishnagiri for the use of the Sangha and endowed it with one hundred gold dramas. In the same neighbourhood a meditation hall was constructed for

monks in 877 by a minister of the Silaharas of Konkan, and other endowments are recorded at the same time and place for the regular worship of the Buddha²⁴.

On the whole, however, Jainism had more influence than Buddhism on the life of the people, particularly in Karnataka and in the Tamil country owing to the striking contributions made by Jaina authors to the literature of Kannada and Tamil. The Jaina temple built at Aihole by Ravikirti in the reign of Pulakeshi-II is said to have been the abode of all excellences, and Jaina temples and monasteries continued to be built everywhere in the extensive dominions ruled by the Chalukyas and the Rashtrakutas. Rashtrakuta Amoghavarsha-1, for instance, found solace by retiring to a Jaina monastery more than once in the course of his long reign. Many of the early Western Ganga monarchs were followers of Jainism, and it also found patronage under the Eastern Chalukyas Amma-II built two Jinalayas and established feeding houses (Sattras) attached to them where Jaina monks (Sramanas) of all the four castes were to be fed".

Jainism had much more in common with Hinduism than Buddhism, and many popular beliefs and practices were common to both the systems. Thus in 12 A.D a Jaina temple was endowed for the Sanaiskara (Saturn). In many Jaina grants we find that the donces are required to use the proceeds of the endowments for their daily rites and observances interms identical with those employed in Hindu donations; and influential guilds of merchants often included a strong Jaina wing in their membership. Soon after the establishment of Vijayanagara, Jains complained to King Bukka Raya of persecution by the Vaishnavas. The monarch interceded in 1368 A.D and decreed that both parties should mutual interference. Though Jainism has been steadily losing ground it has not altogether disappeared from the country particularly in parts of Gujara

Another sect outside the pale of Hinduism, which continued to count some adherents in South India though it had disappeared elsewhere, was that of the Ajivikas. Founded by Gosala Maskariputra, a contemporary of the Buddha and Mahavira, the strictly deterministic school was influential in the Mauryan period in the north, and Asoka and his successor of Dasaratha presented fine rock-cut caves to it. They believed in an inexorable Destiny (Niyati) which man was unable to counteract.

The South Indian Ajivika monks practiced severe asceticism, and probably influenced by Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism, came to look upon Gosala as an ineffable divinity, they also developed the view that all change and movement were illusory, and that the world was in reality eternally and immovably at rest. The inscriptions show that they were sometimes subjected to a special tax levied on them, at least by the Cholas

The contact of South India with Islam is much older than that of the worth A Muslim fleet first sailed in Indian waters in 636 A.D, when a governor serving under Caliph Umar sent an army to Thana; but Umar disapproved of this.

Very soon afterwards, Muslim traders continuing the contacts of pre- Muslim days settled in numerous parts of the Malabar coast, married the women of the country, and the issue of such unions became the Mappillas (Meplahs) Such Muslim traders were encouraged by Hindu Rajas who used them to procure horses for their cavalry and to man their fleets. Al-Ishtakhri, an Arab writer of the 10 century A.D who knew India at first hand, says that there were Muslims and Jumma Masjids in the cities of Rashtrakuta Empire. A doubtful legend relates the conversion to Islam of the last of the Perumal rulers of Kerala, Cheraman Perumal.

He is said to have made the pilgrimage to Mecca and to have sent directions from there to the rulers of his homeland to receive Muslims hospitably and to build mosques for them. Travelers like Masoodi and Ibn Battuta testify to the presence of Muslims and mosques all along the west-coast. There were Muslim settlements on the East-coast also, of which Kayalpattanam and Nagore were the most important. Islam, it is said, was preached actively near Trichinopoly early in the eleventh century by a Sayyed Prince of Turkey, Nathad Wali, who became a missionary, came to India, and spent his last years converting many Hindus.

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