Cast System, Hinduism and Religious Identity

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Abstract. This paper deals with complex problem of Indian cast system/division which had been shaped through the ages and up to now violates the principle of human equality. Socio-caste structure arose and rooted in traditional Hindu ideology of ontological division between dvija/twice-born and outsiders. Cast division had a strong influence on religious and philosophical identity. This paper takes the profound philosophical system of Shaiva-siddhānta as an example, which got an ambiguous identity: not orthodox Hindu darshana (āstika) and not very heterodox (nāstika), but some kinds of marginal to Hinduism. Many of Shaiva-siddhāntin authors were not Brahmins and belonged to shudras and untouchables—not dvija. Status of Shaiva-siddhānta reflects cast contradictions, and contemporary battle of ideas and ethno-cultural dispositions between northern and southern India, Aryans and Dravidians, nigāma (Vedic tradition) and āgama (para-Vedic).

Introduction

Social relations in India are full of cast tension and conflicts, which are historically rooted in ideological, religious causes. Though caste discrimination is prohibited by Indian Constitution (§ 15), cast system as a whole does not move to radical changes. Socio-caste structure emerged in traditional Hindu ideology of ontological division between dvija/twice-born and outsiders. Cast division had a strong influence on religious and philosophical identity. This paper takes the profound philosophical system of Shaiva-siddhānta as an example, which got an ambiguous identity: not orthodox Hindu darshana (āstika) and not very heterodox (nāstika), but some kinds of marginal to Hinduism. Many of Shaiva-siddhāntin authors were not Brahmins and belonged to shudras and untouchables—not dvija. Status of Shaiva-siddhānta reflects cast contradictions, and contemporary battle of ideas and ethno-cultural dispositions between northern and southern India, Aryans and Dravidians, nigāma (Vedic tradition) and āgama (para-Vedic).

Religious Sources of Cast Division: Rigid Social Structure as the Essence of Hinduism

The genesis of caste division ascends to ontological diversity among Varna social functions,
which symbolizes the body organs of the first person in the myth - Puruṣa in "Puruṣa-sukta" of Rig-Veda (X. 90). This hymn depicts that on the very top there are Brahmins originating through Puruṣa’s head, and on the very bottom stay shudras as for they are made from his feet and only for the upper Varnas’ service. Further in Maitri Upanishad it was prohibited to go into shudras and others who “are always merry, always abroad, always begging, always making a living by handiwork; and others who are begging in towns, performing sacrifices for those who are not allowed to offer sacrifices, who make themselves the pupils of Sudras, and Sudras who know the sacred books; and others who are malignant, who use bad language, dancers, .. actors, ..”. For the believer in the Veda, continues Upanishad, “with all these he should not live together. They are clearly thieves, and unworthy of heaven” (VII. 8-9) [1]. We draw from the text that already in the times of Upanishads, shudras became outsiders of Brahmanic world; they occupied different skills beside serving, they knew and performed some religious rituals not sanctified by Brahmins; there were learned and sophisticated shudras and they had pupils. Thus, a number of shudras did not obey Brahmanic laws to do serving job for upper Varnas, and that was both social and religious revolt against dvijas. Brahmins’ reaction was to establish social soteriology with caste duty/dharma as a central position that strictly prescribed executing the duty only of his/her Varna (varnāśrama-dharmah) and not the other’s duty.

Later Hindus sacred books sustained this social soteriology by ontological basis for respectively each of Varna/caste duty and forbidding performing the others’ dharma. Bhagavadgita (XVIII):

“40. There is no being on earth or again in heaven among the gods that is liberated from the three qualities born of nature. 41. Of Brahmans, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, as also the Sudras, O Arjuna, the duties are distributed according to the qualities born of their own nature! 42. Serenity, self-restraint, austerity, purity... are the duties of the Brahmans, born of (their own) nature. 44. … action consisting of service is the duty of the Sudra (servant class), born of (their own) nature... 47. Better is one’s own duty (though) destitute of merits, than the duty of another well performed. He who does the duty ordained by his own nature incurs no sin” [2].

Religious Varna rules were historically enforced, divided to species and proportionally shared by numerous communities included in formation of caste (in Sanskrit “jāti”) system. Many thinkers assert that caste rigid social structure is the essence of Hinduism. Mysore Srinivas discovered that cast system generated through inclusion and agglomeration of external groups and tribes within Hindus hierarchical order that he called “Sanskritisation”: “there is no other way to confess Hinduism than to be born in one of numerous jāti” [3]. As a result, Hinduism became a socio-ideological system of unity-and-diversity under Brahmin domination. What else is Hinduism if not Inclusivismus [4]?

Hindus inclusion process was coming side by side with exclusion of those to whom Brahmins gave a status of non-dvija. Paradoxically, the outsiders - shudras and untouchables, later downtrodden as a rule did not oppose or, fought against Hindus social system. Why not? To my mind karma-samsara dogma as deeply rooted belief of Indians perpetuates ontological status of social division. Therefore, the outsiders whose mysterious intention was to be included strangely and magnetically situated around Hindus core - social structure of dvijas organizing super-structure of Hinduism with its broad margins and casts within. Michael Moffatt argued that the most striking feature of the lowest castes was their pervasive cultural consensus with those higher in the system. Though rural untouchables questioned their particular position in the system, they seldom questioned the system, as a whole [5]. May be a sort of genetic memory about some lower group, which gained its upper status by including into the system has not been liberated from magnetism of Hinduism? Shudras and untouchables in a manner of distorting mirror reflect Hindus social structure. Can Hinduism exist without its margins, without non-dvijas?—A rhetoric question...

Shaiva-siddhānta—a Crossroad between Brahmins and Learned Shudras/Velḷāḷars

The formation of cast system through the ages went closely with formation of Hinduism itself. Majority of Vedic gods and rituals dismissed by aborigine cults of so-called Dravidians much differentiated population in ethnicity and social development. In spite of this dismissing, the Hindus
cast dharma preserved and strengthened. If orthodox Brahmanic texts like Vedānta, advaita-vedānta (nigāma) were composed and maintained by upper Brahmins for the dvijas, other sources of Hinduism had āgamic origin. Āgamas, literature accounting a huge scope of texts partly written in Sanskrit partly in Tamil language [6], deserved high authority in aborigine Dravidian religions and cults and appeared heterodoxy to Nigāma. Therefore, arose the problem of its incorporation into Arya-Vedic culture. The process of incorporation began in middle ages and lasts until now; the Aryans and Dravidians enforces have launched an ancient ideological struggle between the south and north of India by studying and enrolling Āgamic literature into the broader sphere of research [7], and this struggle is rooted in cast and ethnic contradictions which might be traced in the history.

Well known that many of medieval authors originated from non-Brahmanic opposition and did not belong to dvija, e.g., the agents of theistic movements and outlooks of bhakti and Shaiva-siddhānta. The latter means, from Sanskrit “perfect, completed teaching of Shaivism”, a south-Indian religious and philosophical system. The authors who composed its sacred sources predominantly were Tamils; among them were Brahmins as well as non-dvijas. Untouchables and shudras created some fundamental Siddhāntin texts: so called Tamil Veda and most exquisite and beautiful philosophical works, of which the most prominent one was “Śivajñānabodha”. We showed high degree of siddhāntin philosophical discourse on equal level with the other Hindus philosophical schools [7]. Nevertheless, siddhāntin philosophy was included neither in the list of Hindus darshanas nor in āstika. The situation was surprising for Paranjoty V. more than a half century ago: “why Shaiva-siddhānta deserved gradually less attention and research comparing to Hindus darshanas” [8], but since then the matter of surprise did not change.

Meykandar, being the author of one of the sacred sources of Śaiva-siddhānta—“Śivajñānabodha”, as well as Appar and Sekkilar who created another siddhāntin sacred text “Tirumuray”, according to K.S. Murty were shudras—veḷḷāḷars [9]. Veḷḷāḷars were a big social group with differentiations. Kathleen Gough asserts that the veḷḷāḷars have a long cultural history that goes back to over two millennia in southern India, where once they were the ruling and land-owning community [10]. Veḷḷāḷars were landlords, rulers, they also could be non-Brahmanic priests, and, of course, among veḷḷāḷars there were a lot of learned people. The process of Sanskritisation in south India resulted to cast formation of Dravidian (non-Aryan) Brahmins. What about veḷḷāḷars? Now social identity of veḷḷāḷars is a super-cast community on the level of… shudras (!). Why so? During the ages, south Indian Dravidian elite definitely conflicted with Brahmanic elite. According to anthropologists, veḷḷāḷars composed the main population of non-Sanskritized Tamils of the South [11, 12]. There are evidences that veḷḷāḷars were ranked as “Sat-Śudra” and did not agree with fourfold Brahmanic division in the 1901 census [13]. “Sat”, “sattva” as category, means “white”, “light”, “pure”, “noble”. We conclude that those veḷḷāḷars, who had purported to stay on the top of social order, did not obtain this unfortunately and were assigned by orthodox Hindus as “śad-shudras” in distinction to lower shudras, etc. Naturally, veḷḷāḷars who were intellectuals realized themselves on high level of social hierarchy.

David Moose proved that now “statistically, in India the caste into which a person is born remains among the most important determinants of life opportunity” [14]. That means orthodox Hindus social structure became totalitarian power, which embraces not only all Hindus, but also south Asian Muslims and Christians. We suggest that historically veḷḷāḷars were not allowed to form alternative social hierarchical structure apart of Hindus, so they missed their inclusion into Hinduism, and were obstructed, and pushed away of dvijas. Veḷḷāḷa thinkers being non-Brahmanic elite turned into learned shudras hence were not included in the list of Hindus darshanas and āstika teachings.

Summary

Shaiva-siddhānta, religious and philosophical system of south India got an ambiguous religious identity in Hinduism—not āstika or not nāstika due to social background of some siddhāntin authors who descend from untouchables and shudras/veḷḷāḷars. Meykandar, the author of one of philosophical siddhāntin sources not regarding its eminence and profoundness being learned shudra
did not deserve appropriate estimation in the rank of Hindus darshanas. Many veḷḷāļars as southern Indian elite fought for their higher status in social hierarchy but did not win it. Brahmanic orthodoxy pushed away those veḷḷāļars on the level of non-dvijas, shudras, and the title “sad-shudras” (“noble shudras”) was however discriminate. As for Brahmins dominated totally over the sphere of teaching, learning and other intellectual activity, Hindus cast soteriology and cast system established rigid barriers, which are almost impossible until now to overcome.

The history of Shaiva-siddhānta in middle ages equips us with understanding of the complex processes of inclusion of theoretical systems in the frames of Hinduism, defining Hindu identity on one hand as its core and on the other hand, its margins. Those ideological processes went side-by-side with inclusion-exclusion of communities into dvija or non-dvija. The further inquiring in this field, especially percentage and scope of Sanskritizied (if any) and non-Sanskritizied veḷḷāļars, comparing with complete Tamil ethnicity allow us to observe the processes in detail and as a whole picture.

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