

# Revival amidst Challenge?

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In the past two centuries, Tamil Nadu has witnessed tumultuous religious, social, and political changes that influenced the political understanding and cultural preferences of the Tamil-speaking people.

Beginning from the late 1910s, some of the articulate sections of the non-Brahmin community with the covert support of the colonial bureaucracy had constructed a non-Brahmin identity aimed towards gaining equality with the Brahmins. This non-Brahminism was propelled by the Brahmin cultural supremacy and dominance in the middle and lower ranks of the colonial administrative machinery. The majority of the non-Brahmin leadership comprised of the landed elite and a vast number of their followers were from the peasant castes. In the 1920s and 1930s, however, this constructed homogeneous non-Brahmin identity showed signs of whittling down because of the competition within the non-Brahmin communities, fuelled largely by their social and political aspirations. In this jostling for power and status, “non-Brahmin” identity gave way to caste-based generic identities. In this situation, sometimes different castes came together, but more often they were engaged in rivalries that were conditioned by the changing power equation in the society. The Hindu castes, whether “high” or “low,” on many occasions were drawn towards Shaiva and Vaishnava affiliations. The millennial-old traditions of devotion certainly made this affiliation to one god somewhat of a common cultural experience throughout large parts of South India.

In her monograph, Katherine Young essentially deals with non-Brahmin Srivaishnavas, who are worshippers of Vishnu and his consort Sri. The Srivaishnavas belong to many castes and caste clusters where “clean peasant castes” coexist with the “Untouchable” castes. In Tamil Nadu, Srivaishnavas have often identified themselves as *bhagavatas* and have displayed their reverence for bhakti

**Turbulent Transformations: Non-Brahmin Srivaishnavas on Religion, Caste and Politics in Tamil Nadu** by Katherine Young, *Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2021; pp 399, ₹736.*

saints like Ramanuja through the adoption of names such as *Ramanuja Dasar* (servants of Ramanuja). In contrast to the earlier assertions, made by Michael Moffatt (1979) and Robert Deliege (1997), the author admits that the Dalits she interviewed did not seek to identify themselves outside the non-Brahmin or Srivaishnava nomenclatures. But, they did voice the problems faced by their communit(ies) and took pride in their roles within the Dalit organisations. Analysing the mental world of the Dalits in Tamil Nadu is itself a difficult task because apart from the adoption of jati nomenclatures, terms such as Harijans or Adi Dravidas are equally in vogue.

Writing the history of *sampradayas*, including the Srivaishnavas, remains a difficult intellectual exercise because of the paucity of written sources and authentic oral traditions. But, there is an overt reliance on oral traditions that are evident in the pages of the monograph. The question arises whether these oral narratives are to be taken as representations of the contemporary and hence bringing out the divergences rooted in the Srivaishnava philosophy. Nonetheless, a doubt will always remain whether non-Brahmin sampradaya histories vouchsafe a single jati experience or whether they bring out the solidarity of jatis or that of supralocal collectiveness.

## Non-Brahmin Srivaishnavism

The esoteric as well as the fragile nature of non-Brahmin identity convinces many that contemporary Tamil cultural experience is an outcome of the changing social contours of localities or that of neighbourhoods. The Brahmin non-Brahmin divide is not always a matter, of course, of rustic vocabulary. Though the Tamil Brahmin population has

been reduced to a minuscule number, Brahminism as a reference point remains important both in social and political discourses. It reaches great heights when Tamil Nadu goes to the polls and when politicians publicise stories of exploitation and discrimination of their own communities or that of the other communities. Brahminism has waned, but now the non-Brahmin identity too is on the verge of decimation. The devotion-oriented sects, who had radically opposed caste and ritual status, are slowly adopting some of the traditions of erstwhile Brahminism. The preference is only towards those particular philosophical discourses of Brahminism that would give the non-Brahmins some bit of respectability and honour (Harriss 2002; Fuller and Narasimhan 2010).

The supreme deity of Srivaishnavas has many names and forms; the common ones being Perumal, Narayana, Balaji, Vishnu, and Krishna. The supreme deity is set to not only possess royal power but also symbolises tenderness, grace, and beauty. Tamils have shown a remarkable reverence for Krishna, while the Telugus have been eloquent in their adoration for Balaji. These male gods do not have any importance until one identifies their consort. Sri, the goddess, therefore, lends an extra degree of honour to Vishnu—the supreme deity. The Srivaishnava scriptures include both Tamil and Sanskrit texts and incorporate the collective works of the Tamil devotional saints. There are 108 sacred places, including a few in northern India and Nepal, which are important places of pilgrimage for the Srivaishnavas. However, the ones that attract most of the pilgrims are Srirangam, Tirumala–Tirupati, and Kanchipuram. These places are also the intellectual centres of Srivaishnava tradition, bearing close connections with the Bhakti saints of great repute. Bhakti is subsumed within the tradition of *samasrayanam*, which includes the concept of *prapatti*—taking refuge in god by totally surrendering to him and also the ritual *pancha-samaskara* that represents the highest stage of renunciation (pp 14–15).

This Srivaishnava tradition has led to a curious, if not a strange, communication between the Brahmins and the Dalits.

While it is true that the temple cart processions are common in Tamil Nadu, attracting a large number of devotees, they also provide opportunities to Dalit temple servants to discharge their responsibilities. Dalits are not willing to be passive onlookers during these great shows but are more than willing to flaunt their active involvement in them. The series of caste riots in Tamil Nadu has led to further victimisation of the Dalits posing a challenge to the Srivaishnava model of inclusiveness.

### Recognition and Social Change

The co-option of non-Brahmin religious *mathas* (religious institutions with orientation towards theology) within the institutionalised space of Hinduism in South India is well known. Brahminism for its own survival has opened its doors to non-Brahmin leaders for performing

the initiation rituals, which previously were an exclusive Brahmin ritual linked directly to the notion of *moksha*. However, it is doubtful whether the same traditions of initiation have been extended to the Dalits. Young states that religious heads or priests attached to the rural mathas have recently extended these entitlements to the Dalits, possibly to bring down the incidents of conversion and for lessening the rural tensions (pp 60–74). The changing social equation is definitely an issue, but it also has much to do with the changing intellectual trajectories of the non-Brahmin Srivaishnava intellectuals, since the very last decades of the 19th century.

The Srivaishnava non-Brahmins challenged the Brahminical versions of Vaishnavism over a number of issues. Most important of these are related to an almost monopolistic hold of the Brahmins over

the intellectual resources. Very often non-Brahmin Srivaishnavas encountered resilience from their Brahmin gurus in matters related to the transmission of Sanskrit knowledge. Many of the Srivaishnava texts were composed in *Manipravalam* (a combination of Tamil and Sanskrit), making mastery over Sanskrit an essential qualification. Young has succinctly brought out the distinctions inherent in the usage of terms “Tamil” and “Andhra,” emanating from the non-Brahmin Vaishnava experience. Since most of the bhagavatas representing the intellectual audience of the Srivaishnavas were Telugus and not Tamils, there was a marked inclination to keep away from the literary mainstream (p 81). However, the Tamil followers of Srivaishnavism preferred to accept the Brahmins. This trajectory was visible in the cultural experiences of the Tamil Srivaishnavas,

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particularly in their efforts to sometimes incorporate “godless” and sometimes “single-god” traditions within the early 20th-century Dravidian movement.

Young has interviewed a cross section of Srivaishnavas, who were undergoing training to officiate as village priests, as well as others engaged in different professions. Many of the interviewees were candid in their observations related to class, caste, and gender discrimination. Sometimes they also expressed their political preferences that were tilted towards the non-Brahmin political parties in Tamil Nadu. For example, there was an organisation that had 1,500 chapters scattered all over Tamil Nadu (p 136). Its main purpose was to highlight the social problems faced by the non-Brahmin communit(ies) and to bring them under the fold of Srivaishnavism. Incidentally, Srivaishnavism might have evolved as a religious philosophy, but it also had a practical side trying to resolve community discords, propelled by its motive to maintain a less differentiated social order (p 137). The other issue that has been raised is that Srivaishnava organisations deliberately avoided straightforward communication with political parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party or Hindu organisations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The impression that one gets after reading the interviews is that Brahminism is no longer a strong religio-cultural force; rather its ideas have been redefined by non-Brahmin religious orders to create a new variety of South Indian Hinduism.

The other point that has been clearly spelt out is that despite the outward affection for Periyar’s Self-respect Movement, identification with Dravidian atheism has shown a perceptible decline, thus giving place to different forms of Vaishnavism. But the question remains whether the “lower caste” Srivaishnavas would be actually able to keep distance from the “traditional” Hindu virtues like those of vegetarianism and frequent visits of Krishna temples and rather favour a more direct challenge to caste and patriarchy. The long tradition of beliefs in malevolent deities like Kali and Mariamman has not lost relevance; they continue to exercise a grip over the minds of the

less privileged castes. Thus, the resentment against a carefully articulated Hinduised order can only lead to a social chaos, favouring the religious practices of the autochthonous groups. The casteless and classless vision of South Indian Vaishnavism remains a distant proposition, despite the strong criticisms of Vedic traditions.

Young emphatically states that despite the initiatives of the Srivaishnava *acharyas* and *jiyars*, discrimination continues within the premises of the temples. This continues to exist in some way or the other, while the supremacy of the Brahmins regarding the observances of rituals in the inner precincts of the temple is itself a part of the legal battleground in contemporary South India (pp 260–74). Beginning from the early 1920s, several legislations have been enacted, but they failed to keep the temples outside the purview of the law courts. The contestations over the *agamic* form of worship have rejuvenated the issue of caste and have inspired new forms of non-Brahmin assertions, be it cultural or political. But, it is not a one-sided conflict involving Brahmins and non-Brahmins. Rather, it also represents a struggle among the non-Brahmin castes, reviving the old logic of “purity” and “pollution.”

### Framing the Question

However, the question that is finally addressed by the author is how this Srivaishnavism fits into a situation differently defined by scholars influenced by functionalism, Marxism and postmodernism (p 279). It would not be banal to argue that South India can never be understood in terms of an intellectual schism involving modernism versus postmodernism. In fact, there are multiple “modernities” that can define the encounters between the past and the present. Tamil Nadu, like other parts of South India, has remained culturally vibrant where religion, atheism, devotional religious patterns, and notions of secularism can exist side by side with technological progress and modern urbanity. This monograph, like other research in contemporary times, raises the question whether castes are waning or whether

they exist within the rubric of non-Brahminism. Despite enough evidence of non-Brahmins adopting the Brahminical lifestyle, it is still not certain whether this should be the reference point for scholars interested in contemporary Tamil Nadu. Political parties, whether the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam or All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, have been finding it extremely difficult to reconstruct an egalitarian non-Brahmin past. The Srivaishnava philosophy stands at a crossroads in the face of the growing generic caste identities and caste-based political parties.

While doubts persist over the relevance of Srivaishnava philosophy, the author’s attempt to interpret it as a social mechanism to keep caste dictions on hold encourages a new field of enquiry. The paradox lies in the fact that with social oppression showing no signs of abating the Srivaishnava experiment draws the more privileged of the peasant castes, rather than the Dalits. This issue, which is a vexed one, remains less discussed. The elite Srivaishnavas, in terms of caste and class, remain divided from their followers who are mostly drawn from “lower castes” and classes. Undoubtedly, by inverting the societal pattern, the author has tried to unravel the highly complicated and obfuscating networks of religion, caste, and politics that have reshaped the connectivity between the Tamil past and present.

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