

Religion and Literature: Indian Perspectives

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Kaveri Books
New Delhi-110002

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First Published in 2011
ISBN 978-81-7479-119-1

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Published by

Kaveri Books

4832/24, Ansari Road

New Delhi - 110 002 (India)

Tel.: 011-2328 8140, 2324 5799,

Fax: 011-2328 8140

E-mail: kaveribooks@vsnl.com

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Website: www.kaveribooks.com

Laser Typesetting by : Deep Graphics, Delhi

Printed at : Salasar Imaging Systems, Delhi-110 052

PRINTED IN INDIA

Vaishnavism and Vaishnava Literature in Coastal Karnataka

Nagendra Rao

Study of religions in coastal Karnataka did not receive special treatment, till recently, by the historians of the region. Like in other parts of India, religion was studied as a part of political history that included dynastic history pertaining to Alupas, Hoysalas, Vijayanagara, and the Keladi kingdom. The traditional scholars such as Ganapati Rao Aigal¹ and Sheenappa Heggade² analyzed historical traditions of the region. In a way, Ganapati Rao can be considered as a pioneer of the study of history of South Kanara, even though his methodology may not be considered as scientific. B.A. Saletore is one of the first historians who studied society of coastal Karnataka in a systematic manner.³ However, he has not analyzed the growth of religions in the region. K.V. Ramesh⁴ and P. Gururaja Bhatt⁵ are other historians who have contributed immensely to coastal Karnataka historiography, but they did not consider religion as a distinct entity and studied them as a part of their general project. At the same time, one can obtain valuable information from these works. K.G. Vasanthamadhava, in his work – Religions in Coastal Karnataka-has studied growth of religions in this region.⁶ Above analysis shows that not many works have concentrated on the study of religion, even though there are works, which have studied philosophical content of teachings of Sankara and Madhwa. The main aim of the present study to analyze the progress of Vaishnavism in coastal Karnataka as revealed in Madhwa literature. The study becomes all the more important due to lack of previous works on this topic. Madhwa Vijaya or Sumadhwa Vijaya is major primary source, which will be used in this paper, while there are inscriptions, Gramapaddhati, and secondary sources. Madhwa Vijaya shows the ideology and methodology used by Madhwacharya in expanding Vaishnavism in coastal Karnataka. Gramapaddhati, a traditional brahmanical work, deals with issues concerning brahmanas, who played an important role in the spread of Madhwa traditions in the study region.⁷ Gramapaddhati refers to regions such as Rajatapithapura

or Sivalli, which became centre of Vaishnavism. Inscriptions of the region show that gradually there was shift from Shaivism to Vaishnavism, particularly with the emergence of the Vijayanagara Empire, which gave large numbers of grants to Vaishnava institutions. There is a need to corroborate data from literature and inscriptions in order to arrive at a reasonable conclusion with reference to the present topic.

Origin and Growth of Vaishnavism in Coastal Karnataka

It appears that prior to the emergence of Vaishnavism in the region, majority of people had accepted Shaivism as their religion. Even today, a section of brahmanas called Kota brahmanas have remained Shaivas, even though they maintain social interaction with Vaishnavas. The emergence of Sankara was an important event, which resulted in the rise of Shaiva religious institutions in the regions such as Sringeri in Karnataka. Balekudru matha, near Kota, maintained close relationship with the Sringeri matha. In the post 10th century AD, there were Vaishnava saints in Karnataka who played an important role in conversion process, leading to the popularity of this religion. For example, Ramanuja who migrated from the Tamil region to Karnataka converted Hoysala king Bittideva into Vaishnavism. This was an important event, as it indicated the beginning of vaishnavization process of Karnataka. Scholars in coastal Karnataka seem to have taken a cue from emergence of Vaishnavism in other parts of Karnataka. Consequently, Madhwacharya is credited with establishment of eight mathas in Udupi, the place, which comprises both Shiva and Vishnu temples. The continuation of Shaiva tradition is proved by the existence of Ananteshwara and Chandramouliswara temples. The mathas' priests were expected to worship Krishna daily in their respective structures. During this period, in other parts of Karnataka, Vaishnavism was emerging as a major religion, as proved by the construction of Vaishnava temples by the Vijayanagara kings including Krishnadeva Raya. The Vijayanagara inscriptions found in Udupi show that Vaishnavism was patronized by the state.

Religion and literature

Religion in pre-modern India depended on conscious and not so conscious creation of literary texts. For example, brahmanas could strengthen their influence by authoring works such as Manu Smriti, a law code text, which prescribed that people belonging to different varnas needed to adhere to their respective functions. Puranic literature is an example of use of literature to legitimize particular religious group. Shiva Purana, Skanda Purana, Vishnu Purana belong to this category. Two kinds of literatures were composed: one at pan India level, which could act as guide for people belonging to different regions. They comprised general rules, which commanded the respect of people of different regions. Second category of texts is purely regional in nature. Their composition was necessary in order to appeal to the masses. Both at national and regional levels, there was composition of two categories of works. One category of texts dealt with pure philosophy, which revealed philosophical traditions of saints. Second category of texts dealt with religious as well as secular aspects. It is the second category of texts, which were important as they

conveyed the message of a religion to the people, who were not able to read and digest complex philosophical aspects. For example, Upanishads, even though challenged a few preconceived notions that was current in Vedic religion, could not reach masses due to their complex philosophy. Puranas, on the other hand, became more effective as they narrated philosophy which could be easily understood by common people. Biographical works become important in this context. Regional level texts become all the more important due to their obvious advantages when compared with complex philosophical works. Madhwa Vijaya and Gramapaddhati are two important regional level texts that narrate the process of origin and growth of Vaishnavism in coastal Karnataka.

Vaishnavism and Gramapaddhati

Gramapaddhati is a text, which reveals the traditional history of South Kanara, as it is a combination of myths and historical events. It is written in Kannada language and found in traditional brahmanical houses. Curiously, I was able to find this text in Vaishnava mathas of Udupi, and B.A. Saletore quotes Puttige version, implying that Vaishnava mathas took interest in composition and preservation of this text. Vaishnava religious leaders had a compulsion to know different brahmanical sects. For example, there is reference to conflict between Kota brahmanas and Koteshwara brahmanas, concerning land ownership.⁸ It is possible that both Kota and Koteshwara brahmanas originally practiced Shaivism. Due to conflict, Koteshwara brahmanas had to look for an alternative religious ideology, which was offered by Vaishnavas of Udupi. Tradition claims that Koteshwara brahmanas, in distress, were protected by the Vaishnava saint Vadiraja, who was the leader of Sode matha. Today, Koteshwara brahmanas claim allegiance to Sode matha. Historical research shows that Koteshwara brahmanas originally belonged to an outside region called Shimoga and they might have migrated to the coastal region and ultimately settled in Kota.⁹ The conflict between Kota and Koteshwara brahmanas provided an opportunity to Vaishnava saints to convert non-Vaishnavas into Vaishnava faith. It will be showed later that Madhwacharya was also interested in converting large numbers of people in different parts of India, proved by his religious dialogue with leaders belonging to other religions. An important theme of Gramapaddhati is the fallen brahmanical villages. Sahyadri Khanda, another brahmanical text, refers to similar development, as there are various brahmanical groups that become part of mixed castes, thereby showing Varna Sankara in western coastal India. It is possible that stories concerning fallen brahmanas were inspired by similar myths present in pan-Indian texts such as Manu Smriti, which refers to proliferation of jatis.

Similarities persist between Gramapaddhati and Sumadhwa Vijaya. Both works mention sanskritised version of places and personalities such as Odipu, Shivalli, Mudillaya, Kudavuru, Talekude, Neyampalli, Madinaya, Totantillaya, Karyuru, Kutyadi, Maraditaya, Pashupe, Padmatirtha, Kavu, Kodipadi, Kabenadu, Mudembadi, Idetude, Kokkada, Kabesimha or Jayasimha, Nidillaya and Pejittaya. At the same time, there are differences between these two texts.¹⁰ The function of Gramapaddhati, a brahmanical tradition was to strengthen the position of a particular brahmanical community in the region. The function

of Sumadhwa Vijaya, on the other hand, was to exhibit the power of Madhwacharya. To achieve this motive, various Madhwacharya's achievements were listed. Whereas Gramapaddhati mentions 32 villages in south coastal Karnataka, Sumadhwa Vijaya refers to 63 brahmanical villages.¹¹ This number is mentioned in the context of argumentation between Madhwacharya and another scholar. The brahmanas of 63 villages were exposed as they exhibited their lack of knowledge.

Vaishnavism, Literature, and Sumadhwa Vijaya

As mentioned earlier, Madhwacharya played an important role in popularizing Vaishnavism. The Udupi version of Vaishnavism is also called Madhwaism. This is due to the leadership provided by Madhwacharya to the people of the region. Sumadhwa Vijaya is biography of Madhwacharya. The work also reveals the saint's ideas, ideology, struggles, and philosophy. The main function of the work is to exhibit the power of Madhwacharya, who is expected to possess divine might, due to direct relationship with Anjaneya and Vayu. The work comprises various incidents, the miracles performed by Madhwacharya.

Madhwacharya and his successors indulged in the process of knowledge production, though various writings. The saint himself was a great writer as he is credited with the composition of more than thirty works, which presented the views of Madhwa school of thought. In these works, one can find a critique of Advaita philosophy and exposition of new philosophy of Madhwa saints. The time was ripe to write a critique of Sankara's works. The scholars in eight mathas of Udupi are expected to study various works such as Brahma Sutra, Bhagavadgita, and Bhagavata written by Vedavyasa ; Brahma Sutra Bhashya, Anu Bhashya, Anu Vyakarana, Upanishad Bhashyas, Gita Bhashya, and Bhagavat Tatparya Nirnaya composed by Madhwacharya ; and various works written by Jayatirtha, Vyasatirtha and Raghavendra Tirtha.¹² The collection of works available in libraries of eight mathas of Udupi shows that importance of given to the creation of a body of knowledge, which could be used to justify Madhwa philosophy. Recitation and interpretation of such works were necessary to popularize the religion. An important function of religious texts seems to give divine status to saints such as Madhwacharya.¹³ This is because based on the religious literature today Madhwa disciples claim that Madhwacharya was the divine part of God Vayu, proved by excellent energy that was present in this saint. Miracles become important to show the prowess of Madhwacharya.

Sumadhwa Vijaya comprises incidents that relate to intellectual and physical prowess of the saint. The work, written by Narayana Panditacharya, the disciple of the saint, refers to his intellectual campaign. In the process, the saint has to exhibit his superior knowledge. Ultimately, he was able to emerge victorious in the debates.

Sumadhwa Vijaya narrates establishment and consolidation of brahmana settlements of south coastal Karnataka, which ultimately became the basis for popularization of Madhwa traditions in the regions like Udupi. Madhwa tradition is linked with the places like Sivalli, Kokkada, Ramakunja, Padi, Kudalu, Ujire, and Kodipadi, the regions located in south coastal Karnataka and north Kerala. During the Madhwa and post Madhwa period,

the regions such as Sivalli, Kota, Brahmavara, Niravara, and Kandavara emerged as major brahmana settlements of the region. It was important for Madhwa saints to attract attention of brahmanas who had settled in these regions. Interestingly, one finds large numbers of Vijayanagara inscriptions in this region. Even though Madhwacharya did not maintain direct link with Vijayanagara, there are evidences to suggest that his disciples were able to emerge as influential religious group in Vijayanagara court.¹⁴ It is true that Vijayanagara did not differentiate between various religions in the empire. Despite this, one can suggest that Madhwa saints were able to emerge as a dominant religious group, affecting the popularity of other sects. This achievement was made possible through the composition of several works of prominence by Madhwacharya and his successors. Obviously, they understood the importance of knowledge as *shastra* could be used to win over even hostile groups.

The superior knowledge of Madhwacharya is revealed by the fact that he was able to give hundred meanings of Vishna Sahasra Nama that praised the glory of Lord Vishnu. In this way, the book attempts to differentiate between this saint and other scholars of the period. Sumadhwa Vijaya comprises chapters that include greatness of Hanumanta, Bhima, and logic of Madhwa incarnation, his early life and childhood, education, and asceticism. It is mentioned that Madhwacharya visited regions such as Badari in North India where the saint was able to obtain information concerning God. He also went to Goa and exhibited his religious and spiritual authority. It is mentioned that in Goa a brahmana called Sankara offered him 4000 bananas, which were easily consumed by the saint. When he was not allowed to leave the place, Madhwacharya was able to disappear by using mystical power. He performed various other miracles in Goa.¹⁵ Today Vaishnavism has emerged as a major religious sect among Hindus of Goa.¹⁶ The last section of the book consists of various miracles performed by this saint. He seems to have considered the region between Goa and Kerala as his main area of operation. Consequently, this region today comprises people who respect Madhwa sect.

In the context of coastal Karnataka, it becomes important to study relationship between religion and literature as this topic is ignored in the existing literature. Literature can influence growth of a religion. This is found at pan Indian level and this thesis can be extended to the regional level also. Gramapaddhati, a traditional literature of coastal Karnataka exhibits features of a literary work that represented interest of brahmanical groups of the region. One can note similarities and differences between Gramapaddhati and Sumadhwa Vijaya. They are the brahmanical works, but the function of Sumadhwa Vijaya is to glorify the achievements of Madhwacharya. Composition of this work enhanced the prestige of this saint. This is proved by the fact that Udupi has emerged as the center of Madhwa religion and literature.

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