

Between saints and secularists — 2

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Belonging

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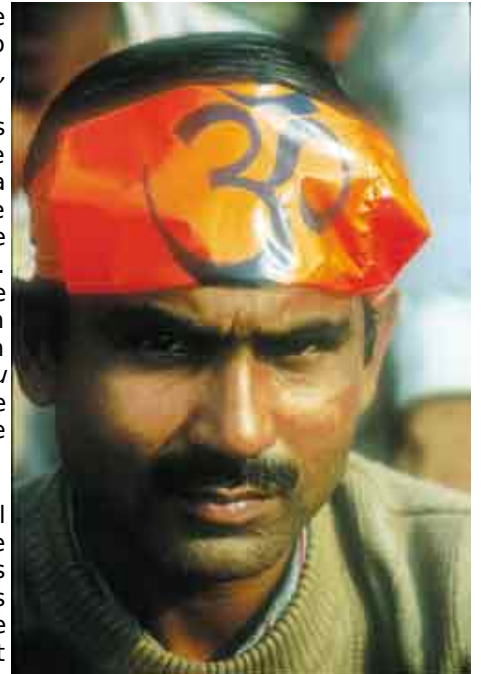


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The disappearance of women priests and the conversion of fertility cults dominated by women into celebrations dominated by men, like Ganesh Chaturthi, are all signs of similar patriarchalisation of society. Ancient Indian texts abound with legitimising narratives where the caste system is shown to have divine sanction. The Purusha Sukta of the *Rig Veda*, probably a later interpolation into the Vedic canon, says that the mouth of the divine became the Brahmin, his arms the Kshatriya, his legs the Vaisya and his feet the Sudra. The *Bhagavad Gita*, again considered by historians like D.D. Kosambi to be a later Brahminical interpolation in the *Mahabharata*, brackets Vaisyas, Sudras and women together and calls them the 'base-born'. The *Vishnu Purana*, the *Padma Purana* and *Satapatha Brahmana* are full of similar narratives and situations that glorify the Brahmin at the cost of other segments of society.



These myths became the fountainheads of actual social laws and practices codified in the *Grihya Sutras* and the *Dharmashastras*, which clearly lay down the principles of differentiation and institutionalise inequality, as does the *Manusmriti*. This inequality extends from the payment of interest on loans to the punishment suggested for crimes like abuse, robbery and murder and from the ways of swearing to the naming of children. While the Brahmin should swear by Truth, the *Sudra* should swear by his wicked deeds; the Brahmin's name should denote something auspicious, the *Sudra*'s something contemptible; the Brahmin's interest on loan is two per cent, the *Sudra*'s is five; the penance for killing a *Sudra* is one-sixteenth of the penance for killing a Brahmin and a *Sudra* can be given capital punishment for reviling a Brahmin while the other *varnas* get off with a fine of varying degrees.

The Sramana tradition, on the other hand, is counter-hegemonic, often to the degree of being subversive. The Buddha and Mahavira, who interrogated the *Varna* system, questioned the priesthood, spurned rituals, upheld the equality of beings and hence condemned violence, whose victims in those days were mostly the *Sudras* and the animals useful for the peasants, may be said to belong to this tradition. The Bhakti-Sufi movement was another major pan-Indian articulation of this stream of subaltern dissent.

The spokesmen/women of the movement mostly came from the subaltern or marginalised sections of society and were workers, women or Muslims. Namdeo the tailor, Kabir the weaver, Tukaram the peddler, Chokamela the bricklayer and Gora the potter were some of them. Bulhe Shah, Baba Farid, Mir Dard, Shah Abdul Latif, Sultan Bahu, Madho Lal Husain, Sheikh Ibrahim Farid Sani, Ali Haidar, Fard Faqir, Hashim Shah, Karam Ali and other Sufi poets were Muslims by birth. And there were women saints from Lal Ded and Meerabai to Andal, Ouviair and Akkamahadevi, who transcended their gender and whose stories are also often tales of emancipation from the oppression and subordination they experienced as women. The *Sahaja* cult of Chandidas and the cult of Chaitanya also did not recognise caste and creed and hence provided moments of liberation for the *Sudras*.

Tukaram, Kabir, Namdeo, Meera and the South Indian saints like Allamaprabhu and Basaveswara did not accept the authority of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Even the Sikh credo, that received its elements from various religious sources including *bhaktas* like Jayadev and Namdeo, has been little influenced by the *Gita*. Jnaneswar quarrelled with Brahmin beliefs in Alandi and hence had to seek refuge on the southern banks of the Godavari to write his popular version of the *Gita*. The Manbhavs (or Mahanubhavas), who belonged to the sect established by Chakradhara in Maharashtra in the twelfth century AD, also would have nothing to do with Brahminism; they practised a kind of primitive communism, sharing everything equally and denounced the idea of caste. Even Eknath, who was born a Brahmin, fell victim to the displeasure of his priestly class for opposing the caste system. The Varkari pilgrims of Maharashtra also renounced caste and refused to follow rituals.

Opposition to the priesthood, discrimination on the basis of colour, nation, race and wealth, various forms of rituals and even to temples and mosques is a recurring theme in Bhakti-Sufi

various forms of rituals and even to temples and mosques is a recurring theme in Bhakti era poetry. All of them were committed to the languages their people spoke, and often used many tongues (Mira or Guru Nanak, for instance) to drive home their egalitarian message among their people, but never Sanskrit. Listening to a *baul*/singer in a train in Bengal or to a grandmother in a Tamil home singing verses from Andal's *Tiruppavai*, one is still struck by the intensity not only of their spirituality but of their firm faith in the equality of beings and their stubborn rejection of divisive practices, from the wearing of the holy thread to the observation of untouchability.

I often wonder whether even our most radical secular politicians, with their eye on the vote banks, have ever expressed their rejection of superstitious rituals and caste differences so sincerely and vehemently as the Bhakti and Sufi poets, who upheld only the supreme independence of the spirit which allowed no man-made barriers to pollute its self-awareness. Sree Narayana Guru, one of the last great saints in this oppositional tradition, fertilised his understanding of Advaitic philosophy with his knowledge of the *Siddha* tradition and Tamil Saivism. Along with Sankara, he also mentions Appar, Nandanar, Sambandhar and Manikyavachakar in his *Atmopadesasatakam* as the voices of truth; his images and verses often take off from the texts of Manikyavachakar and Pattanathu Pillaiyar. This has much to do with his discourses on the body that subverted the entire semiology of caste differentiation, its dress code and distance code and its suppressive modes of individuation, and converted the temporality of the body into a moment in the narrative of the search for the self through illumination or *arivu*. In his *Jatilakshanam*, Sree Narayana develops a critique of *jati* or caste and says that all beings who embrace and procreate together are the same *jati*. He argues for a differentiation based not on false principles but on true ones, so that it has a value in the elaboration of *arivu*. The only true principle of differentiation he finds is the natural principle, the principle of the species. The body is a sign that reveals the ground of true differentiation. Not only does Narayana go beyond caste in his philosophy and practice, but he also transcends religion.

Anukampadasakam, for example, presents Christ and Mohammed and Buddha as realisations of *anukampa*, the principle of compassion. His famous statements, like, 'Do not inquire after caste, do not say it' or, 'It is enough if man is good, whatever his caste' and his insistence on purity as suggested by the ideas of *Suddhipanchakam*, including *dehasuddhi*, the cleanliness of the body with its emancipation from caste marks, point to the main elements of his reform project. First, the belief that a process of individuation and redefinition of caste as community rather than conversion to another religion should constitute the cornerstone of reform, since conversion fails to redefine difference in terms of natural law, and secondly, the conviction that the redefinition of communities ought to take place within the locus of a tradition — a belief he seems to have shared with Gandhi, to whom we come at the end of this article.