

A Discussion on Religion at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century Kerala: A Select Study

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 16Aug 2019

Keywords

Religion/Matam, Intellectual Tradition
Vagbhatanandan (1885-1939), Brahmananda
Siva Yogi (1852-1929).

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about the emergence of a new intellectual tradition on the turn of nineteenth century in Kerala. The main contributors of the tradition were a group of thinkers turned reformers who contributed the socio-political changes which have taken place in Kerala as part of its colonial modernity. The writings of two major thinkers of the period are subjected to scrutiny in this paper. These include two articles namely Matham and Matachintha by Vagbhatanandan and Mokshapradeepam, a text by Brahmananda Siva Yogi. The focus is more precisely on the formation of multiple understandings and interpretations of Religion/Matam within the newly constructed intellectual tradition.

Kerala had been witnessing a shift in the production of knowledge [both by the introduction of western education and by the popularisation of the non-brahminic systems of Sanskrit education]. A different intellectual tradition has emerged and contributed to the continuing shift which has been happening in the social space. The participants were not always traditional intellectuals but a new group of writers and thinkers who were also willing to intervene in the social and cultural practices of prominence at the time. Some of the major thinkers of the period were Cattampi Swamikal (1853-1924), Sree Narayana Guru (1855-1928), Vagbhatanandan (1885-1939) and Brahmananda Siva Yogi (1852-1929).

These thinkers at the beginning of the twentieth century debated and discussed religion on a regular basis. Their discussions varied in character due to various social events to which they had to respond and also various social contexts in which they lived. The audience of each discussion were different, the social reality of caste, class and community differences contributed to how a text speech or a conversation played out. National movement, colonial education, emerging consciousness of representation among different communities, new leaders and social reform activities, circulation of old and new ideas and a public space for responses, conflicts and thereby tension are a few of the factors that constituted a unique social atmosphere in Kerala. Religion had a major role in all the above factors, I am using the term 'Matam' to refer to religion.

The focus of the paper is on how the very concept of religion is transformed through conversations and conflicts among a set of thinkers. Matam is the word that is often used in Malayalam to signify religion, the prominent meaning of the word is opinion. It will be interesting to see how religion is translated into different understandings of Matam. The study is mainly based up on two articles namely Matham and Matachintha by Vagbhatanandan, Mokshapradeepam, a text by Brahmananda Siva Yogi is used here as a material for comparison. These writings envision a conversation with the readers, Siva Yogi considers his writings as tools to eradicate misunderstanding about Matam. He states this purpose in the preface of the text. Chattampi Swamikal another thinker of the

period wrote Cristumatachedanam for the same purpose or at least that is what the preface says. All the above writing contains general responses to few ideas and skepticisms among the thinkers and the public.

Though religion is the main element in those discussions, the method of interpretation and signification are different in each one of them. My argument is that a single text itself produces multiple possibilities of understanding and interpretation of religion / Matam, Those possibilities occurs due to a very specific pattern of arranging facts and events and constructing new results. Each time the pattern is different even within a text or in a conversation because the interests and purposes of it evolve through its own narrative, the contesting ideas and thoughts which come from all directions provide more options to forge new facts which is visible in many philosophical arguments at the time, in fact it's safe to argue that availability enable the participants / thinkers to pick what they need to build their own interpretations and neglect anything else.

The whole activity creates ambiguity about how to understand Matam, but it also creates different modes of interpretations on Matam. The thinker, through the ambiguity of his text construct different version of same institution- religion or even destroy and renew what constitute the institutionalism itself. Here the renewal is not an activity of inventing a new Matam or even destroying old one, it is an activity of creating a new sensibility by creating new ways of understanding of Matam.

Vagbhatanandan's article Matachinta exhibits the tendency to pick useful facts and neglect others in order to create his version of Buddha Matam. To prevent the emerging popularity of Buddhism, Vagbhatanandan criticises it by drawing a comparison between Hindu and Buddha matam. He portrays Buddha as someone who borrowed concepts from Hindu religion- "ahimsa" was taken from Patanjali, according to Vagbhatanandan. He strengthens his argument by suggesting Sankaracharya's acceptance of Buddhist ideas. He warns the public not to misinterpret it as a another version of Hindu matam nor is it a different religion altogether. In his point of

view, Buddha fought against the malpractices and reformed the existing religion, He preached ultimate freedom which is salvation, but his followers lost their divinity in the later period of history and people left their Matam.

So Vagbhatanandan creates a Buddha who found a religion by expanding certain aspect of Hindu Matam- The thinker conceptualises Matam as a compilation of different traditions of thought/ darsanam in the same article- yet reject the status of Buddha Matam as an extension of Hindu Matam. He put forward an interesting argument by stating that the religion lost its greatness because of the immoral or unethical practitioners through time. Buddha Matam like Hindu Matam has issues within its internal structure, modern Buddhists have wrong understanding of the religion and they produce false interpretation. Since the interpretation is inaccurate, one should not fall into those preachers, here the logic is sound but instead of drawing attention on how the interpretations turn wrong, Vagbhatanandan draws attention to wrong deeds done by the "Heenayana" and Srilankans.

Here the practitioners are not followers or believers of the Matam, they are the interpreters or authoritative figures who through their writings determined the future of the religion. Vagbhatanandan gives agency to the later thinkers who interpret Matam and neglects other sources of power which might have contributed to the faces of any religion – rulers, kingdoms, other groups and religions etc. According to him, religion is thus the whole total of thoughts/ 'chintadhara' which intended to help Humanity in a philosophical level. When put blame on interpretations, he excludes day to day discourses of religion in the social space. The participation of the common folk in the formation of any religious and its practices is what is excluded from the discussion, the very idea does not get any currency in the above way of understanding religion.

Interestingly it is the one version of Matam which enables him to criticise Buddha matam. In the article Matam, Vagbhatanandan conceptualises Matam as "a great project to elevate the greatness of Human being who is the ruler of the universe". As the writing proceeds, Matam becomes the reforming force that ends all sorts of superstitions and ignorance from the face of Humanity. It is the light that leads to salvation/ultimate freedom'. Thus it is a higher entity that support a philosophical quest, at the same time it interferes in the day to day life as a purifying agent.

Even if the founders of religions get an uplifted stand in grant schemes for attaining salvation, the 'humanity' as a group gets to play the role of seekers. In Matachinta Vagbhatanandan calls Matam a tool for humans to attain freedom. Here the importance is given to humanity, they are not enactive by sands in the shadows. The involvement of believers- and others- create a different understanding of how Matam is to be interpreted.

This transformation in both understanding and mode of interpretation is what makes religion a real force in the social sphere. It is important to note that the second version of understanding on religion emerged in the discussion when the text conceptualises religion for the readers, not when it

criticises pleas for conversion. So it's a preaching mode not a defending stand. Vagbhatanandan problematizes the ideological variations- wrong turns- in the first version for not going after Buddha Matam. In the same article, he constructs a humanitarian version of Matam to create awareness among the participants / readers. Though I use the word Humanitarian, it has little to do with European humanism. I am not rejecting the influence of Humanism. The inclusion of the activities of the followers in the interpretation construct new religious subjectivity gives Matam a new phase of 'participatory mobility' (a flexibility in inclusion and movement). The freedom of individual is not the driving force behind the new phase, it is the freedom of collective/ humanity group that evolve through the writings. Again the freedom is said to be spiritual and the new subjectivity does not have separate entity from a collective consciousness.

Siva Yogi talks about 'Matam extensively in Mokshapredeepam. The text produces different versions or interpretations of Matam by categorising it in different levels. The first chapter Saktimahatmyam considers religion as a way of understanding 'Sakti'/life force'. He says that sakti is present in anywhere and everywhere, nothing will be active without the force. He thinks both 'nastik/ rationalist and believer will be able to accept the omnipotence of this superior force.

Here Matam can be understood as the explanatory tool which translates this life force into day to day discourses. He conceptualises 'matam' as set of rules to experience this life force when he says 'sakti' is an Omni presence that manifests through every action and beings.

Then Siva Yogi goes on detailing Hindu Matam and compares it to others, His analysis becomes complicated when different religious groups are categorised under the term 'jati' at one point and the same groups are categorised under a different criteria at another time- namely 'sakti'/life force or Brahman which is worshiped by all religion

In the second chapter Matabhedaprakaranam Siva Yogi states that the intelligence and ethics of the preacher is what make the rule acceptable- - here the 'Matacharyar' create religion, but it is not clear if he refers to founder or later scholars though the shift of rules in different contexts indicate the dependency on intellect of various scholars across time

If the scholars who wrote texts about religion get authenticity and monopoly on the concepts that they propagate as religion, the religion becomes a compilation of high standard intellectual thoughts/ 'darsanams' thus it primarily is a philosophical activity- he categorises 'darsanams' as superior intellect and less knowledge.

Again the problem of agency is a crucial point in Siva Yogi. He too considers the scholars as practitioners not the common folk who deal with it in day to day life.

In chapter seven Jatibhedakhandanadiprakaranam, Siva Yogi considers 'jati' as a large biological category. He put both religion and caste as sub categories and use both as interchangeable groups and construct a new meaning of 'iati'

which turns out to be the community of all human beings. Then religion as a sub category becomes a group that produce rules and norms for certain set of people who are differentiated by geography, colour language and so on.

It is noted that the ambiguity does not exist in the process of interpretation or the clarity in understanding the interpretation, in fact it is the clarity of arguments and clarity in the way of combining concepts and knowledge that create

variety in interpretation and novelty in understanding. So ambiguity comes from different possibilities of understanding- each way of understanding is packed with logical arguments and there for each interpretation holds clarity. Again different interpretations of one ideology are acceptable in both Indian and Western traditions, but here the interpretations transform religion in a unique way. Instead of constructing new religion, thinkers of the period produce new ways of understanding Hindu Matam or any Matam for that matter.

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