

## **TURBULENT TRANSFORMATIONS: Non-Brahmin Srivaisnavism on Religion, Caste and Politics in Tamil Nadu by Katherine Young. Ori-ent Blackswan, Hyderabad, 2021.**

*Turbulent Transformations* brings a critical caste lens to the study of what has been viewed as a significant sectarian (pertaining to a definable sect) religious tradition in Tamil Nadu, Srivaisnavism. At a time, when the term Hindu appears infinitely extendable, and capable of assimilating a range of positions, arguments and beliefs, it is sobering to remember that not too long ago, the term did not have the meaning it does today. Religious practice hinged on sectarian beliefs and organizations and were not easy to coopt within a so-called 'national' religion.

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This book examines Srivaisnavism in its sectarian existence: not as doctrine or soteriology, but as a creed adopted by a group of practitioners, comprising Non-Brahmin and Dalit individuals and families in Tamil Nadu. Katherine Young puts late colonial and contemporary experiences of Srivaisnavism in conversation with their social and political milieu: defined by the powerful anti-Brahmin and Self-respect movements on the one hand, and a politics, anchored in a felt and expressive Tamilness, on the other.

There are three parts to the narrative: The opening chapters point to what made Srivaisnavism attractive to Non-Brahmins in a religious milieu, dominated, at least from the early medieval period, by the Brahmins and temples that were under their control. In line with other scholarly thinkers on the subject, Young notes the devotional world of Srivaisnavism made for a limited, though, fervent community. It held out the promise of spiritual equality and salvific freedom for all, irrespective of birth, sex and caste. While not socially consequential in all instances, and limited by the real world structures of royal and spiritual authority and property and caste standing, this promise drew Non-Brahmin sudras, from the cultivating, artisanal and trading classes and sections of the so-called outcastes into the Srivaisnavite fold.

We see how this freedom was reworked and updated in and through a dormant yet powerful language of rights and equality in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as sudra spiritual mentors updated their spiritual claims, often in the face of Brahmin authority and control. Young does not quite dwell on what made this possible, though she places it within the moment of modernity. There is a rich history of ideas here that stands to be unravelled, and the book gestures towards it, without actually laying out the protocols for what might be done henceforth.

The chapters that follow (Chapters 3 to 6) proceed from the late colonial past to the immediate present, and here we are introduced to a range of Srivaisnavas, most of whom are from the Naidu and Vanniyar castes. The former comprise Telugu speaking men and women, who, however identify themselves with Tamil Vaisnavism, as expounded by the 12 Alvars, devotional poets from Brahmin, Non-Brahmin and Dalit communities, whose writings form a distinctive literary and spiritual corpus, viewed, in some instances as equivalent in value and significance to the Vedas. While Young references Dalit adherents of the sect now and then,

we hear of the views of only one group of them, all belonging to a single family and kin cohort.

Young's subjects comprise men (and a few women) who, originally were from families of farmers, weavers and in some instances traders. At the time of the interviews, a substantial number of them were town, if not city dwellers, living in well-marked peri-urban or suburban neighbourhoods, in the close vicinity of a Vaisnavite shrine. Identified as 'Bhagavatas', as different from Brahmin Srivaisnavites, their sense of religious belonging appears to have to do with an expansive and egalitarian vision of the faith espoused by Ramanuja, the eleventh century sectarian leader and philosopher. This is as true of the Dalits as it is of the Non-Brahmins, though with Young's Dalit interviewees, we see a faith leavened by democratic fervour.

In expressing their Srivaisnavism, these sectarians challenge Brahmin monopoly over Srivaisnavite doctrine and text, seek to uphold the importance of the Tamil Vaisnavite devotional corpus, and insist on their right to propagate their vision of the creed. Young notes that proselytization was a key feature of all medieval sectarian traditions, and in the late colonial and modern period, this assumed particular institutional forms: the setting up of associations such as sabhas and the equivalents of what in the past were known as 'Sri Ramanuja Kutams' (assemblies of adherents to Ramanuja's sect), the conduct of lectures, publishing of tracts, and the ordination of people that desired to enter the Vaisnavite fold, through specific rituals. In contemporary times, such sabhas also offer 'secular' goods, to do with health and astrology.

What has proved contentious though is this: who possesses the right to ordain whom, and through what means. Traditionally, Srivaisnavism has been propagated by lineages of men, drawn from 74 Brahmin families, who hold themselves to be official teachers of Ramanuja's doctrine, and are known therefore as 'acharyas'. There was another line of adherents, men who gave up their householder lives and turned ascetics, and who came to be known as the 'jeeyars' and this included both Brahmins and Non-Brahmins. Acharyas perform the rite of spiritual ordination (known as samashrayanam) for Brahmin adherents, but usually are averse to doing this for Non-Brahmins. While some Non-Brahmins were able to persuade the acharyas to ordain them, this does not happen often, and it is the Non-Brahmin jeeyars who end up ministering to their fellow caste men and to Dalits. But this does not include the actual ordination ritual, during which the marks of Vishnu are literally branded on to the skin of the would-

be adherent, which even Non-Brahmins concede is a Brahmin prerogative. Young presents us one exception here, a Brahmin who has since been hailed as Ramanuja of the present, for daring to ordain and consort with sudras and Dalits. She also points to governmental efforts to set up schools of spiritual learning for Non-Brahmins and Dalits, backed by court rulings, but notes that these have not been sustainable.

Even as Non-Brahmin sectarians challenge Brahmin reluctance to be their spiritual mentors and protest being kept out of spiritual communities and temple-related rituals, such as chanting from the Tamil spiritual corpus of texts, they are not frontal in their opposition: they appear to want to achieve a separate but equal status. And besides, they are uneasy with the strident and passionate language of rights, as put forth by the Self-respect movement, and many expressed their misgivings over the latter, even as they noted that in their younger days they had been drawn to it. The Dalits who appear in the book are clearly drawn to Gandhi than Periyar or Ambedkar. While all Non-Brahmins featured in the book profess a caste-free religiosity, it is not clear if the Bhagavatas wish to remain fraternal with Dalits in the broad sense of the term.

Young does not comment or gloss such views for us, but only presents them. She is more forthright in her pointing to the privileges and claims exercised by Brahmins, which she contrasts with the richer and more layered history and content of Srivaisnavism. In this context, she distinguishes between the two strands of Brahmin Vaisnavites: the Northerners (Vadakalai) and the Southerners (Thenkalais) and notes that the latter, were more eclectic and egalitarian and favoured the use of Tamil as a language of worship, and that they were often disdained as not being Brahmin enough. On the other hand, the Thenkalai group too was not particularly forthcoming when it came to heeding the spiritual claims put forth by the Non-Brahmins, possibly because, Young reasons, they sensed a challenge to the general Brahmanical control over the temple, the priesthood and the system of shares that separated out temple honours. In this context, she reviews the history of legal struggles to access and equality, and points to the equivocal stance adopted by judges, which, in practice, endorses Brahmin claims.

Missing in Young's appraisal of the social, civic and spiritual progress of Tamil Brahmins (which she does in the last two chapters of the book) is a critical sense of their claims to exclusivity. Brahmin exclusiveness rests on its perceived privileged relationship to scriptural and philosophical traditions of learning, but

this is asserted rather than demonstrated, given that apart from a handful of them, Brahmins are not familiar with these latter. Further, the priesthood that is often viewed as an iconic symbol of privilege was not historically in possession of this learning either, being trained only in secondary rituals. The fictions that underwrite Brahmin claims to exclusivity including in the secular sphere of the arts, which Young concedes have been challenged, need to be further interrogated.

Curiously, Young has not sought to visit the temples and associations of Srivaisnavites of Southern Tamil Nadu, which have had a longer history of ecumenism, with respect to doctrine as well as practice. Tamil scholars such as Tho. Paramasivam have written extensively on the subject: Paramasivam's masterly book on the Alagar Kovil, the temple of Alagar in Madurai, is a wonderful historical and ethnographic account of the temple and its festivals, and how a pro-visional and liminal *communitas* has been built and sustained over centuries.

While valuable as an account of a field of experience that has attracted little scholarly attention, Young's narrative does not quite produce for the reader the 'turbulence' promised in the title. While it invokes conjuncture and context, and gestures towards the importance of place-making and everyday religiosity, it does not seek to locate these within a broader social history of Tamil life, as it has unfolded in post-independent India.

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