



Opening the Boundaries of Citizenship

Gurus and Citizenship

Dr Aya Ikegame:

Hello, my name is Aya Ikegame. I am a social anthropologist and I am working on religious gurus, their religious institutions called mathas in southern India.

I am interested in the ways in which gurus act as a provider of social welfare and social justice, and their religious institutions, mathas, are becoming state-like institutions or developmental enterprise. This might sound odd but many mathas in southern state of Karnataka run hundreds of educational institutions from nursery to Universities. Some mathas run private medical and engineering colleges generate a very large profit. But these profits go to running of free schools and free hospitals in rural areas where such welfare provision is not available. Religious institutions such as mathas are vital for many citizens living in rural areas since what the state provides is often inadequate or not easily accessible. Mathas are active not only those areas of education and health but also one of social justice. For example, Dr Shivamurthy Shivacharya Swamiji, the guru of influential Hindu matha in central Karnataka, runs an informal court 'Nyaaya Peetha' which means 'the seat of justice'.

In every Monday morning, hundreds of people gather in this informal arbitration court run by Shivamurthy Shivacharya Swamiji. Many of the cases he arbitrates are disputes within a family: a widow wants to have a share of deceased husband, disputes over their father's land amongst brothers, first wife demands for her maintenance from her husband who started having so-called 2nd wife, and so on. There are also cases of industrial disputes between mining companies and villagers, and disagreement over the treatment of temple land which is a common property for the entire village. Hearing goes on until later night sometime early morning of the next day. Many petitioners coming to this guru's court are very distressed and some start crying during the hearings.

In the cases of temple land it's very interesting to see how and why the informal court such as Nyaaya Peetha works in contemporary India. There are several cases related to temple land. All of them, the persons who were entrusted the safeguard of the land sold it without letting villagers to know. One village, they wanted to take the land back from the original trustee, and give it to the matha. They could form another trust as they have done in the past, but they prefer to give it up to the matha so that no one will touch the land. The temple land should not belong to anybody. Behind their rather 'faithful attitude', there is an idea which is becoming increasingly popular in India that those who do not have family such as gurus who are mostly

renouncers are more trustable than elected politicians who have family and relatives to support. Recent large scale corruption scandals simply enforced this idea that politicians have to be corrupt in order to leave money for others but renouncers such as gurus are not because they don't have any kin to support.

Another type of guru I am interested is Mr M.C. Raj, internationally well-known activist and writer. Born as a Dalit, former Untouchable, he grew up in a Christian educational institution. In his many writings, he has denounced all the established religions, not only mainstream Hinduism, but also Christianity and Buddhism into which many Dalits converted in order to escape discrimination traditionally attached to their status within Hindu society. M.C.Raj, instead, claims that Dalits have always had their own religion, and they should recover the sense of their own religiosity and affirmative feeling of what they really are. He calls this recovered religion or spirituality as Dalitology, the theology for Dalits and of Dalits. Apart from running a very successful NGO that operates many innovative developmental projects in rural Karnataka, M.C.Raj and his wife Jyothi have established a spiritual centre called Buumi shakti, the power of earth, which they believe the central deity of Dalit spirituality.

The interesting thing is that this left-leaning and originally very secular minded (or even anti-religious) activist is becoming a sort of guru himself. Dalit followers began calling them as Appaji and Ammaji and treated them as their own guru. Whenever M.C. Raj goes to visit his fellow Dalits in a village, they insist to wash his feet. He says he sometimes refuses to have this ritual, but sometime he cannot do so. Dalit villagers like to do this traditional ritual called 'paada puja' at their guru's feet like other caste people do to their more established gurus like Dr Shivamurthy Shivacharya Swamiji. I don't think M.C. Raj and Jyothi wanted to become a guru like religious leader in a first instance. But their Dalit followers or they might prefer to call them comrades, want to make them gurus. It seems that there is tension between egalitarian ethos which M.C. Raj believes as the essence of Dalit spirituality, and hierarchical relationship between disciples and the guru. This tension can be seen when Dalit person greets M.C. Raj. The person would prostrates and touch Appaji's feet like many guru followers do when they greet their guru. But then, he stands up and both of them raise their hands and say to each other 'Jay Bim', means Victory to Ambedkar, the ultimate hero of modern Dalit struggle in India'. Suddenly they become comrades again.

The ways in which villagers surrender some of their democratic rights, such as a forming a trust, or elect a representative or trustee amongst themselves, and the ways in which Dalits followers of M.C. Raj's movement eagerly surrender themselves in front of him. The act of doing so might just look devotional and /therefore irrational act, but what they tried to achieve by doing so is far from irrational. They are very conscious of what they want to realise is a fairer society and social justice. So what they are doing is giving up certain democratic rights in order to achieve more democratic society.

I would like to call what people of south India is actively involving themselves through constituting a transcendent, focus of power and authority as post-secular citizenship. But I am proposing here that different forms of citizenship can be found outside of Euro-America, and these can be recognised as citizenship. Actually what they do, constituting a sovereign for themselves, is not so different from what we do by entrusting the state to use exclusive force and the state to be the only source and authority of law. At the same time, the ways in which religious leaders becoming as a completing, fragmenting, and competing sovereign is a quite unique India adaptation of modern democratic exercises.

Orientalist normative discourses tend to dismiss political movements led by religious leaders as anti-democratic, fanatic, and irrational. But detailed ethnographic enquiry might be able to provide different vocabularies not only to explain contemporary political activities outside of Euro-America which otherwise beyond the normative, but also to destabilise what we take for granted as a democratic citizenship.