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**THE CONFLUENCE OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE TRADITION AND THE  
SUBALTERN ISSUES IN CHANDRASHEKHAR KAMBAR'S *SIVARATRI***



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**ABSTRACT**

Of all the plays of Chandrashekhara Kambara, *Sivaratri* stands apart from the point of view of dramatization as well as its theme. It deals with the 12<sup>th</sup> century Sharana movement (Vachana movement) in Karnataka from the subaltern point of

view. The present treatise has focused on the confluence of indigenous knowledge tradition and the subaltern issues in Kambara's *Sivaratri*.

**KEYWORDS**

*Sivaratri*, Subaltern Studies, Indian historiography, Classes, History

## RESEARCH PAPER

The Subaltern Studies Project began more than twenty-five years ago, it is known to be a major epistemological intervention in the modern discipline of history writing. The Subaltern Studies is a meaningful critique and a daring interrogation of the mainstream Indian historiography. The term 'Subaltern' is explained in the work of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). The British word 'Subaltern' means someone of inferior in the military rank. The word is derived from the Latin, it combines the Latin terms for (sub) "under" and (alter) "other". It refers solely to Peasants, who had not been integrated into the Industrial capitalist system.

Presently, Subaltern refers to any person or group of inferior rank or station, whether because of race, class, caste, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, socially, politically, and geographically outside the hierarchy of power of a colony. Subordination can be understood better in the constitutive terms in a binary relationship:

The subaltern classes, by definition, are not united and cannot unite until they are able to become a 'state' ... the history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. There undoubtedly exists a tendency to (at least provisional stage of) unification in the historical activity of these groups, but this tendency is continually interrupted by the activity of the ruling groups... in reality, even when they appear triumphant, the subaltern groups are merely anxious to defend (Gramsci, 1971; 52. 54).

According to *Sage Encyclopaedia*, "Subaltern studies refers to the study of social groups excluded from dominant power structures, be these (neo) colonial, socio-economic, patriarchal, linguistic, cultural and racial" (*Sage Encyclopedia*- 20). Under this label we also see several kinds of political and cultural binaries like: Colonialism/Nationalism, Imperialism/ Indigenous cultural expression and more generally Subaltern/Elite. In the Post-colonial era it is a category of subordinate sections: The Tribal, the Adivasis, the farmers, the unorganized labourers, the minorities, the women, etc., who have not been considered as subjects of their own histories and consciousness.

The Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) or Subaltern Studies Collective (SSC) is a group of South Asian Scholars. They were interested in the Postcolonial and Post-imperial societies and they started their work at the University of Sussex in 1979–80. The SSG arose in the 1980s; it was influenced by the scholarship of Eric Stokes and Ranajit Guha who formulated a new narrative of the history of India and South Asia. The group which was started at the University of Sussex continued their task. They widely travelled, mainly through Ranajit Guha's research scholars and the narrative strategy was inspired by the writings of Gramsci. The term Subaltern Studies is sometimes also applied more broadly to others, who shared many of their views and they are often considered to be Exemplary of Postcolonial Studies, and as one of the most influential movements in the field. In the Postcolonial theory, the term 'Subaltern' describes the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margins of a society. A subaltern is a person rendered without agency due to his or her social status. In the Postcolonial era, the Tribal, the Dalits, the Farmers, the unorganized labourers (Irrespective of caste), the Minorities, and the Women are the Subalterns.

The ideas and practices of the indigenous communities or sex to meet up their needs under specific environmental settings may be designated as Indigenous Knowledge, which they develop traditionally through life experience;

The Indigenous Knowledge consists of the little traditions which propagated and percolated and transmitted orally from people to people, generation to generation. The age-old women as well as men of folk communities are treasures of the Indigenous Knowledge" (ILO convention 169 of 1989, Roy Burman 2000).

The Indigenous Knowledge is intangible cultural heritage of the folk community which include ideas, voices, values, customs, rituals, traditions, morality, oral history, folk life, creativity, adoptability, and distinctiveness of the people. These are manifested through dwelling, clothing, cooking, traditional skills, technology, ceremonies, manners, customs, performing arts, storytelling, and so on.

Indigenous Knowledge system doesn't necessarily mean the knowledge of the indigenous people only, but also to that of any other community. The term indigenous knowledge system delineates a cognitive structure in which theories and perceptions of nature and culture are conceptualized.

All this phenomenon of Indigenous Knowledge tradition and its significance is carried out throughout in the play, *Sivaratri*, making the people sensitized about *Ishta Linga* and its principles, Basavanna by his spiritual preaching made the people to learn and lead a meaningful life with high thinking. He preached about equilateral principles and condemned caste discriminations and other social evils in the society. Hence, the knowledge about *Ishta Linga* or *Shaivism* or *Lingayatha* made the people to become ardent followers of Basavanna with a new outlook. Later this change in their life paved the way for many new happenings in the society, such as *Sharana Revolution*.

‘Sharana’ means one who has taken retreat and in the context the term refers to those who took shelter in Shiva. During the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Karnataka witnessed a great social-religious, political, and literary reform movement. Many scholars called it ‘the Sharana movement’ or ‘the Vachana movement’. The religion point of view, it is called the Sharana movement but the literary point of view it is called the Vachana movement, the vachana is a type of poetry. Basavanna (1106-1167) was the leader of this movement. By birth, he had had rebellious spirit in his home. He had cultivated devotion for Shiva and contempt for conventional Vedic rituals and beliefs. He became reputed, learned in the society. His fame as a great scholar and devotee of Shiva spread all over Kalyana, the capital of Bijjala. Basavanna became a trusted friend of the king very soon. He rose to become the royal treasurer (Bhandari). During this period Basavanna turned into an ardent social reformer and began to preach against the casteism, blind beliefs, rituals, animal sacrifice, *Yaga*, *Yagna*, and purification of *atma* (soul) and such other socio-religious practices. Very soon Basavanna became successful in sensitizing these matters in the minds of the men and women in the society and he gathered in and around him a large number of followers, who came from different castes and classes in the society; and they joined into a sect called *Veerashaiva* a particular form of *Shaivism*. It is also called as *Lingayatha*. Basavanna made all his followers to wear a small Linga (*Ishta Linga*) as a mark of identity. He established an institution called *Anubhava Mantapa* (hall of experience). Pertaining to his reformatory and humane teachings, the number of followers increased enormously.

The new sect attracted many great philosophers, scholars, and poets of the period, including Allamaprabhu, Mahadevi Akka, and Sule Lakkavva, Siddarama, from all walks of

life. In order to express their thoughts and feelings, they created a new literary form called *Vachana*. (Which literary means spoken) a form partly poetic and partly prose. These Vachanas were preserved in the oral tradition until the 16<sup>th</sup> century. They were collected and given a formal return form by name *Shoonya Sampadane*. At this movement the two followers of Basavanna, Madhuvarasa, (a Brahmin) and Haralayya (a Dalit) decided and get their children (inter-caste) married. This infuriated the orthodox sections in power; for this compulsion, (act of the two) Bijjala cruelly punished the parents who had disobeyed the caste-system. However, Basavanna's followers responded against the king Bijjala. Ultimately the revolt was forcefully put down.

Besides, Basavanna through the new sect attracted many great scholars, philosophers, etc., to express their thoughts and feelings and their indigenous knowledge they created a new literary form called Vachana (Spoken form). These have got varied themes and tone; pungently, satirical intensely dramatic highly didactic in nature. Among his precepts these following three are at the core of new Lingayath sect; 1) Kayaka (Work ethics), includes every kind of manual labourers like carpenters, potters, tanners, wavers and farmers; 2) Dasoha (metaphorically education) which even allowed the poor to live with dignity; 3) Linga (faith in Shiva). He rebelled against all types of indiscrimination and advocated simple living and high thinking and love of all living beings. The following Vachana expresses these views clearly that as follows:

Don't steal, don't Kill,

Don't tell lies and don't get angry.

Don't dislike others; don't praise yourself,

Don't ridicule others; this is inner purity.

And this is outer purity.

This is the way to please our lord of Kudala Sangama (Kambara 15).

The above example of vachana would help us to understand how the knowledge and the essence of life induced in Vachanas aroused many things in the minds of the common people specially the followers of Basavanna.

The play *Sivaratri* is the dramatization of 'a dream' - the dream of Basavanna and his followers. Who were all held responsible for the 12<sup>th</sup> century social, political, and religious

revolution, later it was called as Sharana revolution. It had a very great significance and brought a great change in the society and its impact is felt even today. Even if we limit to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we find great writers like P. Lankesh, H.S. Shivaprakash and Girish Karnad writing plays on the movement. However, the Sharana movement was of such vastness and all in that no single work can do justice to all aspects of the movement. The writer can express his view from his perceptiveness.

When we look at Kambar writing a play, it is different from all other works on that movement; at the same time this *Sivaratri* is different from almost all the plays of Kambar. Interestingly Kambar's play here follows the three unities: Unity of Time, Unity of Action and Unity of Place, which were advocated by Aristotle. The duration of the play is limited to just one night-dark night after the Sharanas, Haralayya and Madhuvarasa were issued death punishment. The same night in which the king's soldiers hunted out the Sharanas (Basavanna's followers); the night in which everywhere the atmosphere of fear was prevailed. The place of action is also limited to just one part of the city of Kalyana, king Bijjala's capital-that part of the city in which the denigrated sections of the society (under privileged people) such as Dalits, Gamblers, Prostitutes, and such others lived. Indeed, except Basavanna and Bijjala, all other characters in the play belong to downtrodden society. Kambar as a playwright is known for his well knitted plots and aptly developed characters. But in this play plot is not much constructed consisting of proper beginning, middle and an end in the action. Rather there is a series of scenes beginning with the socially 'humble' ones and ending with meeting between Basavanna and Bijjala.

All these attempts made by the playwright is to portray Sharana movement from the point of view of the deprived sections of the society. As Prof. C.N. Ramachandran points out:

The Play intends to address certain interesting questions regarding the movement.

a) How did contemporary lower classes view the Sharana movement?

b) What values of life generated by the movement entered in their lives?

c) What was the nature of conflict between Basavanna and Bijjala?

d) We should note that every socio-religious movement as two aspects; The first aspect deals with certain abstractions regarding the nature of god, creation of this universe, god-man relationship etc., and the second aspect consisting of certain codes of conduct pertaining to daily life" (Kambara 10).

The first aspect although Sharana movement seemed a Mass movement, one can't say the deprived classes had understood the concepts of 'Ishta Linga, Dasoha, Kayaka, Sthavara-Jangama' and such.

Similarly as the play reflects illiterate and poor people like Kallappa, Kashavva, the old man evaluate the incidents of the death sentence meted out to Haralayya and Madhuvarasa, performing inter-caste marriage and such on the basis of 'Natural Justice'.also Tungavva's anger and Kallappa's response; Savantri the prostitute defends her professional bindings and ethics with the king; Savantri states:

My king! Don't get angry. We in this profession, must equally treat all the customers who comes seeking our service. That is professional ethics. When he tendered the same price that you do, I couldn't reject him". For the king Bijjala chided her. "Bijjala saying; (sarcastically) oh, I see! Ethical considerations have reached even the houses of prostitutes! Great; Basava, you are great...(Kambara 60-61).

The thief Chikkayya, who comes from Kashmir (sent by his king to kill Basavanna) goes through change of heart and becomes a Sharana and a follower of Basavanna. Chikkayya asserts, "He (Basavanna) prostrated before me full length, forget my killing him; he killed the thief with in me! On the very same day, I got myself initiated into the Sharana sect and to remember what I was earlier, I began to go by the name- Chikkayya the thief...(Kambara 52).

All these details established the fact that Basavanna's movement had dribbled even to the suppressed class of the society and had deeply influenced their lives. The ones that remained untouched and away from socio-religious movement of Basavanna were those who belong to the upper caste in the society like Harihara the scholar and the palace dweller. In one of the circumstances of the play Kallappa (A poor manual labourer) tells his labours about Basavanna as elder brother (Anna). Kallappa states:

In the *Mahamane*, it is said, Sharana's place their souls on their palms and make them dance. You should know all this old man, don't you? It seems Basavanna gives everyone a soul each". Kashavva replies: "They are given free; they are called Linga the father Kallappa then exclaims;" "If they are free couldn't you brought one or two

for us also, sister? Then we would also place them on our palms and play with them (Kambara 33-34).

These above said dialogues in the play make it clear that common people, even contemporaries of Basavanna had not observed the abstract symbolism of *Ishta Linga*. However, certain basic codes of conduct and behavior preached by Basavanna (such as: thy shall not steal, thy shall not tell lie...) had reached common people and influenced their life too.

The incident of the stolen 'pearl-ruby necklace' is belonging to the palace creates this point. When Damodara, the son of Harihara Pandit (Court Scholar) steals the necklace on the initiation of his father and hides it in Kashavva's hut, the old man states that, "Look! Here is the dead rat... Whose is this? (trun into Damodara) Is this yours, brother. Damodara: yes" (Kambara 41).

Sangayya the innocent gets it and gives it to Kamakshi, she thinks she doesn't deserve such a costly object and transfers it to the prostitute Savantri. She declares that she has not earned it by her hard labour. But the Scholar-Brahmin Harihara covets such a precious necklace and initiates his son to steal it.

The entire play of Kambar as depicted on the binary contrast of *Aramane* and *Mahamane* at the climax of the play, both these binaries confront each other at mid night at the house of Savantri the prostitute. Whereas Basavanna representing *Mahamane*, comes there in search of Sangayya the innocent. The king, representing the palace (*Aramane*) comes there seeking pleasure. This is the most significant and striking point emerged in the play; the saint confronting the king in a prostitute's house, on the dark night of new moon day, when king's soldiers are hunting down the saints' followers everywhere. Kambar exploits this striking situation as an incident to establish the values and the principles of *Mahamane* and *Aramane*. Here subaltern views later became issues and paved the way for the development of other vicissitudes, transforms in the dramatic way in the play.

Basavanna treats Savantri the prostitute as 'mother' whereas Bijjala the king treated her as a degraded who lives selling her body. *Aramane* (Palace) suggests rules and



regulations, scandalmongers, spies and soldiers; *Mahamane* is a place where all are treated as Sharana's irrespective of caste, creed, community differences, meet each other and shared their experiences. The language of *Aramane* is Sanskrit, the language of god; but the language of *Mahamane* is the spoken language of ordinary people, all people, scholars and laymen too.

The Motif and organizing pattern of the play can be seen in the words spoken by Basavanna to Bijjala. Basavanna asserts:

King's laws should have strong base of 'God's consciousness'; they should respect Man's self-respect. As long as the laws don't transgress these two-criteria, you remain a 'King' however since your laws transgressed these principles, we had to seek, my lord other possible paths (Kambara 84).

Bijjala understands the claim of these words of Basavanna. When he is about to be killed by Jagadeva and Bommarasa. Bijjala confesses, "I too am wounded all over, my friend, when it is pouring down from the wounds. All said and done, I am a '*Bhavi*', a man of this world, Basavanna, forgive me. Jagadeva; Mallibomma, come I am ready" (to die) (Kambara 110).

Besides Kambar uses vachana's of Basavanna and other Sharana's very aptly and in appropriate places. Which gave new bent to the play all together. The effect of these Vachana's can be seen in certain phrases and sentences, which not only make the play more dramatic in nature but also hark back to the poetry and concerns of Sharana's and gave a spiritual elegance to such passages. The utopia of *Shivapura* and its nature echoes metaphorically in the play *Sivaratri* at a particular point equates Kalyana (Bijjala's capital).

At the same time the term *Sivaratri* is charged with terrible irony. According to the Ancient Hindu myths, the rituals conducted on the day of *Maha Shivaratri* symbolize many values, non-violence, truth, sympathy, and forgiveness but this play (*Sivaratri*) shows heartlessness, violence and cruelty of political system. So what we find here is on that night in place of Shiva's worship and prayers we see the bloodshed and murder of Sharana's by soldiers; The kingship that doesn't want to return even the dead bodies to their relatives but prefers to offer them as food for hawks and crows; fathers who force their children to steal from the palace;

the established thief who becomes a 'Sharana'; the prostitute who adheres to certain principles even in her degraded profession; Sangayya the innocent who insists on performing his 'Linga-Puja' only in the prostitute's place and the meeting between the saint and the king in the house of Savantri. This is indeed as absurd world, and the play compels the audience to watch and grasp this absurdity. As Sutradhara says:

On that night, in Kalyana, nothing was in the right place and right order. Non had any trust in others; and each one listened to others with suspicion. Everyone's words had two meanings: the apparent and hidden. On that night, the dark night of Shiva, Kalyana didn't sleep; but it wasn't awake as well as rituals required (Ramachandran 94).

Hence, Kambar's play *Sivaratri* makes us to remember as C.N. Ramachandran clearly states, Kuvempu's *Smashana Kurkestra* and Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, is the latest, different powerful play on the 12<sup>th</sup> century Socio-Political Revolution and major contribution to kannada theatre. Thus, the play *Sivaratri* reflects all the characteristic features of indigenous knowledge and its significance as the subaltern issues in *Aramane* and *Mahamane* very effectively.

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