Hidden Spheres of Politics

Chandan Gowda, National Law School of India University
What should be the content of the anthem for a state? Early this year, an extraordinary set of circumstances set off a vigorous debate in the Kannada public sphere and in Karnataka in general on important issues of inclusion and exclusion. The key actors included leading Kannada authors, matadhipathis and religious leaders, editors and newspapers, the Karnataka Government, the Karnataka Sahitya Parishad and many such.

The unusual controversy was caused by the passionate reactions to the exclusion of the 13th century dvaita philosopher Madhvacharya from the Naada-Geethé (State-Song) adopted last December by the Karnataka government. The uproar has provoked issues and debates that could have sub-continental relevance.

The Karnataka government launched the centenary celebrations in honour of Kuvempu, the Jnanpith winner and Kannada literary giant, on December 29, the poet’s birthday. As part of the celebrations, the department of culture decided to consecrate Kuvempu’s 1928 poem, “Jaya hé Karnataka Maathé,” as the official state-song. This poem celebrates the rivers, sages, poets and other cultural icons of “Karnataka Maathé, the daughter born of Mother Bharatha.”

Sri Vishwesha Teertha Swamiji of the Pejawar matha, one of the eight mathas (monastic orders) founded by Madhva in Udupi, objected to the omission of Madhva from the poem recited in the audio cassettes released by the Department of Culture in early January this year. He wondered how the state-song of Karnataka could mention non-Kannadiga philosophers like Shankaracharya and Ramanujacharya and leave out Madhva, a native philosopher of Karnataka.

Madhva’s name originally did not figure in the poem; but, the president of Karnataka Sahitya Parishad (KSP), the state’s premier literary institution, pointed out that Kuvempu inserted Madhva’s name in his poem in 1971 in response to ‘popular demand.’ There is no written evidence of the poet’s consent but a former president of KSP during 1971-72 testified that the poet had indeed consented to the revision and therefore, the “Kannada Ratna Kosha (A Compendium of Kannada Gems)” published by the Kannada Development Authority in 1971 contained the revised poem. However, ‘The Complete Poetry of Kuvempu’ published by Hampi University Press in 2000, retains the poem in its original form.

Another Jnanpith awardee, the Kannada writer U.R Ananthamurthy, provides the most convincing interpretation of the non-mention of Madhva’s name in Kuvempu’s
poem: since Kuvempu was a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, an *advaitin*, (monist), a *dvaita* (dualist) philosopher like Madhva was not acceptable to him.

In a press statement, Poornachandra Tejaswi, the well known reclusive Kannada writer and also the son of Kuvempu, asserted that the omission of Madhva’s name was justified since the philosopher had said that Dalits and Shudras were “*nitya narakigalu*” (people who lived eternally in hell) and “*thamoyogyaru*” (people deserving darkness) and as such were not “*muktiyogyaru*” (people deserving spiritual liberation). Tejaswi further argued: whereas the philosophies of Shankara and Ramanuja admit possibilities for the downtrodden to unite with God, Madhva’s philosophy does not allow for the spiritual liberation of Dalits and Shudras. When this was the case, how can we sing praises of such a philosopher? asked Tejaswi.

Outraged at Tejaswi’s comments, the swamijis of the Dvaita monastic orders in Udupi became defensive and issued angry, sometimes contradictory, statements. Sri Vishwa Teertha Swamiji, head of the Pejawar Matha, dismissed Tejaswi’s comments as baseless and challenged him to prove that Madhva denied spiritual liberation to the Dalits and Shudras. He clarified that Madhva only believed that anyone, irrespective of caste, who had “*tamo guna*” (the quality of darkness) could not attain liberation. He then argued: since Sankara and Ramanuja, like Madhva, also provided justifications for the four-fold *varna* ordering of social groups, it was only proper that their names also be deleted along with Madhva’s from the poem. Clearly, old philosophical rivalries still flourish.

Kannada newspapers, magazines and websites were filled with charged opinions on this controversy. Could anyone edit a poem after the poet had died? How could one object to the inclusion of Madhva's name as he was only interested in “the development of mankind”? Newspaper readers and professional critics from all over Karnataka dug out evidence ranging from old interviews with Kuvempu to Madhva’s own writings to support their views.

Indologists caution against taking descriptions in sacred texts to be accurate reflections of historical realities. They also remind us to be careful about projecting modern ethnic identities into the past. Political work has to engage with existing popular memories; therefore, the need for accurate historical self-understanding for social struggles becomes a matter of political ethics.

To summarize the subsequent vibrant debate. The Pejawar Swamiji declared that he had done useful social work among the untouchable communities of Udupi and that all castes were welcome at his Math. He accused Tejaswi of promoting inter-caste enmity and fragmenting the unity of Hindus. Tejaswi in turn asked if the Udupi mathas had ever viewed the caste system as socially illegitimate and philosophically indefensible. Had they ever revised any of Madhva’s philosophical claims? Madhva’s philosophical system is conceptually so interconnected, Tejaswi argued, that revising part of it could undo the entire philosophical system. Moreover, the writer said, it was the caste system that fragmented any Hindu unity.
On January 31, 2004, the government of Karnataka recognized the revised poem as the official ‘state-song’. The Pejawar Swamiji thanked the Chief Minister. And, Tejaswi refused to accept the interpolation.

Do we need a ‘state-song’ or not? Should Madhva’s name figure in the poem or not? These questions by themselves are not the most interesting parts of the episode. The most striking feature was that this controversy unfolded within a vocabulary that did not fit easily with the rationality that anchors our public discussions.

In an unforeseen way, a world of textual references that looked at human existence and man’s relation with the cosmos very differently (like jeevatama and paramatma) was claiming discursive space alongside cold discussions of market reforms, elections and international relations. These terms do not make their way into the great discussions on communal harmony in metropolitan centres in this country. Unlike the Kannada media, the English newspapers did not give this matter much attention. This controversy also made visible a powerful public sphere where credentials required for participation are of an entirely different intellectual order.

When the subject of caste finds mention in our dominant public media, it is usually in regard to the issue of reservations or to the atrocities on Dalits in villages. In these cases, the appeal is for state involvement in uplifting “weaker sections of society” and for better enforcement of the rule of law. This moral appeal is anchored in a secularist humanism that views humans as citizens endowed with fundamental rights of freedom and well-being. Secular humanist arguments couched in terms such as “minority rights” and “majoritarianism” do not pose the slightest threat to orthodox religious establishments which wield tremendous influence over millions of people in India.

Just three phrases - Nitya Narakigalu, Tamoyogya and Muktiyogya - could fluster the orthodoxy in Udupi and incite passionate debates all over Karnataka. This showed that conceptions of fairness, equality, self-respect and justice other than those that anchor our legal establishment are a living force in many parts of the country. Numerous localities for democratic work exist where legal-bureaucratic rationalities are of no validity.

An effective politics for communal peace can be forged if one is familiar with traditions of humanism other than the secularist humanism enshrined in our constitution. We will need to address issues of violence, justice and dignity in a way that resonates with the shared moral instincts of people. In the debate that has been narrated here, only prior homework in Madhva’s philosophy and the commentarial literature surrounding it will let anyone participate. Otherwise, one is shut off from an important political constituency.

During this episode, the Kannada weekly, Lankesh Patrike, consulted the latest 1999 edition of Madhva’s writings and published excerpts to show that the philosopher denied women access to the Vedas and forbade marriage between lower caste men and upper caste women. Philosophers like Madhva themselves gave fresh interpretations to
the sacred texts of their time. It is then ironic that his followers are often in a relation of awe and rigid deference to his thought.

Heads of religious establishments have to be asked to make their cherished texts speak to the new political moralities of our time. These are spheres for democratic activism that do not directly concern the state but millions of people are gathered here. These spheres are important sites for building solidarity against illiberal forces. To participate here, a different kind of intellectual training and orientation is necessary.

Activist concerns alone need not take us to literary and philosophical texts from earlier periods in history. A more reflective life can be enabled by these texts. A casual inquiry into the etymological roots of our names can sometimes disclose a world of sectarian strife, competing visions of the divine and heterogeneous affirmations of the purpose of existence. It may also allow us to find moorings for our identities in spaces other than those being created by consumerist and religious fundamentalisms.

E O M