



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 3. Issue.4.,2016 (Oct.-Dec.)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GERMAN AND INDIAN INTERPRETATIONS OF INDIAN
PHILOSOPHY REGARDING THE RACIAL AND CASTE DISCRIMINATION

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ABSTRACT

The liquidation and mass murder in concentration camps is one of the most brutal human rights violations in human history, propagated by the Nazi party in Germany. The idea of racial purity was a philosophy that considerably influenced the intellectual circles in Europe. The vast study conducted in Eugenics or the science of races is an example proving this. Today, Eugenics has been declared a pseudoscience.

But, in order to justify the idea of racial superiority, Nazi party intellectuals looked to India where the tradition of caste based discrimination was practiced for ages. This practice was used as a justification for the mass murder of Jews, gypsies and various other races and the Indian philosophical texts were used to give this act a historical context. But the interpretations and studies of Indian philosophers like Sankaracharya and Shree Narayana Guru show that casteism and discrimination amongst humans is totally baseless and it was a misinterpretation of the Indian philosophic texts for the economic benefits of a handful few.

This comparative study of the texts written by a German philosopher Maximiliana Kohler and Nazi party members and the texts of Shree Narayana Guru and Shree Sankaracharya shows how the various interpretations of the ideas have led to interpretations and misinterpretations and it is an attempt to find out what was the essence of the texts originally without the political contexts.

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Though essentially considered as a colony, and thereby a hostile and exotic land, India became a fascination to many German philosophers from the early 19th century for the cultural and intellectual history India had which stretched to the B.C.s. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, Max Mueller, Frederich Schlegel are few of the early Orientalists who were deeply influenced by the Indian philosophies, like Bhagavad Gita, Nyaya texts, Buddhist philosophies and attached great importance to Sanskrit texts (Priest 329). But later when it came to the Nazi regime, Indian philosophy was often interpreted so as to defend the pseudo-science Eugenics which led to the massacre and extermination of people in during the WWII, the Holocaust. Savitri Devi, a German lady who converted to and became a Hindu and settled in India was a staunch supporter of the Nazi

activities in Germany. She writes, "The Hindus seem to be, today the sole people who by tradition share our view: and they have in course of time, failed to maintain the divine order-the rule of natural ruling castes. And we, the only people in the West who have tried to restore it in modern times have been materially ruined by the agents of those forces of false equality (Devi 12)."

The cross cultural ties between Nazism and Indian philosophy becomes obvious when Hitler chose 'swastika', an ancient Indian symbol as the symbol of the National Socialist party of Germany. There were people like Himmler, one of the most trusted men of Hitler, who wanted to imitate the "Kshattriyakaste" and be like them (Trimondi 14). It was even stretched to a belief that Hitler is acting like Lord Krishna who is said to reincarnate in case of a disruption of order to reinstate 'Dharma' or as the tenth avatar of Mahavishnu or the Kalki, the Destroyer who is supposed to destroy everything that exists and reinstate the Golden age (Devi 35).

The logic behind Eugenics or the science of races was to improve the quality of human race by the practice of selective breeding. Like a better variety of plant or animal is encouraged to be reared, humans with greater intelligence, physical strength and Intelligence Quotient (IQ) must be promoted while the rest are to be eliminated (Bashford and Levine 327). There was a history of forced sterilizations in many European countries and Americas, long before the Holocaust took place creating a certain amount of negative response from few philosophers (Chesterton 36). The fear of Jews and the exclusion they faced from the society around is historic. In England Jews were held responsible for spreading plague in London and murdered and ostracised from London in 13th century (Pasachoff and Littman 154). But when it came to the Holocaust, there was an immense belief that Jews, Gypsies, Romani and Blacks was a danger to the human society and to uphold the racial purity Holocaust was a necessary step to be undertaken (Hillberg 46). To validate the claim philosophically rather than scientifically, they pointed to India where the caste system practised rigidly for centuries.

"Violence became a necessity from the moment the socio-political order in this world ceased to be the undistorted reflexion of the cosmic order"(Devi 24). The violence and the extermination that happened during the Holocaust was not because the Nazi supporters were sadists with an insatiable bloodlust but a part of a necessary sacrifice for the maintenance of order. Every civilization has a certain myth about a glorious past where "social and political order on earth is a perfect replica of the eternal Order of life and there alone is non-violence possible. Every man and woman, every race was in its proper place, and nothing to do but to enjoy in peace the beauty of sunlit earth and to praise the wise Gods-the devas or 'shining Ones' as the ancient Aryans called them- Kings of the earth in the truest sense of word" (Devi 27). Again there is a reference to the skin complexion of the Gods, and justification of violence against races vis-a-vis caste as a part of replacement of order.

Aryan supremacy exerted in India by the means of casteism was justified by Nazi philosophers. The casteist hierarchy determined the profession one could take up and the social status of an individual. The lower castes who were supposed to perform the menial jobs involving manual labour were often not recognised as humans and there was a stigma and shame associated with the lower castes or Dalits which is still prevalent in India. In spite of a constitution that guarantees equality, violence against lower castes is one of the major human rights issues India faces today. The 'jati' or caste acts as a determining factor when it comes to defining individual identity (Kakar 94). From politics to individual human rights and freedom, caste occupies a prominent position even today, where people belonging to a certain caste are said to be untouchables and hence are deprived of education, payment, job opportunities, and human dignity.

But studies of various philosophers including Sree Narayana Guru, Sri Sankaracharya or more recent examples like B. R. Ambedkar, Nithya Chaithanya Yathi and Ramana Maharshi, says that the discrimination on the basis of caste and creed as null and void as per Indian philosophy and by extension the practice of untouchability and racial purity (which claims a historical backdrop from casteism). The interpretations of the religious and philosophic texts by Sree Narayana Guru and his religious activities has made him one of the first and foremost religious reformers of Kerala. He was not influenced by the Europeans ideals of freedom and

equality since he was not familiar with any foreign language, which once more reasserts the authority of his ideals as original and path breaking (Ombedt).

Through a study of the Indian philosophy by Sree Narayana Guru, any sort of discrimination can be proven as a fallacious misinterpretation of Indian philosophy. One of the seminal texts written by Sree Narayana Guru is '*Atmopadeshathakam*' which includes one hundred shlokas (a quartet) composed by Narayana Guru in Malayalam. The book is relevant and important so much that it is compared to the Bhagavad Gita (Guru 79).

The philosophic foundation of Narayana Guru comes from the Advaita philosophy by Sri Sankaracharya. According to the text, the one and only truth is 'knowledge' or 'wisdom' and everything except that is 'Maya'. There is a unity between the 'jeevathma' and 'paramatma' (the mortal and immortal, the mind and soul, human and divine) which is the core of the philosophy of Advaita. That is, though there is duality, they are not polar opposites or antithesis to each other. The quest to find God ends within one's inner self. The unity of the duals becomes clear in statements like 'Aham Brahmasmi' (which may be roughly translated as 'I am Brahma') and Thatvamsi (which may be roughly translated as 'It is You who are the eternal truth'). These terms were found in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad and explained using the Advaita theory by Sri Sankaracharya.

In the tenth shloka of *Atmopadeshathakam*, Narayana Guru says,

One enters a dark tunnel. He feels the presence of another person at the opposite end of the tunnel and asks, "Who are you?" The other person says 'I'. He asks the same question to the one at the other end of the tunnel and receives the same reply. The sense of one's identity, the focal point and the feeling of self (Aham) in both the individuals are the same. In the truth state, the sense of self 'I' is not different. But the false self-realisation makes man incompetent to find the self in another. And that 'I' resides in the paramatma, the universal truth (Guru 38).

This sense of self assurance (Aham) is one's awareness of self is common to the whole humanity. Awareness of the world and society comes after the self-realisation. At this point, one realizes that every 'I' is from the same source or the 'paramatma'. The concept is not that one is like another, but rather one human is the other one. Every discrimination comes secondary because at an individual level there is a sense of unity for everyone.

But this sense of self, or Aham are of two types- true and false. The true realisation of Aham leads to a height of happiness (paramanandam). It is indivisible, ubiquitous, and unique and it can be found only in inner peace. Those who find this would be pure and innocent by nature. But the false sense of realisation is other centred and it is derived in lesser wisdom. It would lead to pride and superiority rather than purity. It is the lack of wisdom that leads to discrimination and false ego. It would require reassurance by social acceptance since the realisation is obsolete. When the self and the divine is perceived from another, the other person will be treated with respect and camaraderie rather than discrimination. This is applicable just to humans, but every object (living and non-living) in the universe. Thus one holds love and empathy towards the whole universe within one's self. To hurt or kill the other would be equivalent to hurting oneself and thus the principle of non-violence becomes important.

Sree Narayana Guru's motto was 'One Caste, One Religion and One God for Humanity.' But he makes it explicit that one religion does not dominate the other. Because every time one person thinks of a single religion, they support their religion and think every other religion and caste is invalid. Narayana Guru supports diversity but refrains from discrimination. The idea deduced is, understanding the religious sentiments of other believers and accepting them for what they are would give way to religious tolerance and brotherhood.

The Mahabharata text is recited by Vyasa, son of a sage and a fisherwoman. Clearly he belongs to a lower caste. His genes resided in the whole puruvamsa. Valmiki, the writer who composed the aadikavya, the Ramayana also belonged to a lower caste. Sree Narayana Guru constantly said that the misinterpretations of Bhagavad Gita and Brahma Sootra is used to validate caste system. He said "Not ask, Not Say and Not think about Caste (Guru 52)" and "Whichever the religion, it suffices to be a good man. (15-16)"

“Thus, one-who-knows sees not a trace
Of anything other than
The bliss of the Self anywhere.
His is truly the highest Bhakti.
Fundamental Reality does not reside
In the seen object as such, but in the Seer.
The Seen is the form of the Seer.

He who unites these is the superior knower of Yoga” (Guru 24).

The quality expected from a devotee is not that of birth in a particular caste or belonging to a lineage. What measures the worth of an individual is his acts, his wisdom and his devotion according to Sree Narayana Guru. This is what tried to prove with the Aruvippuram idol installation incident.

One of the pivotal incidents of Narayana Guru’s life time was the installation of Shiva Linga at Aruvippuram. Kerala in 1888. At Aruvippuram, he chose a stone and with the proper rituals and festivities, he proclaimed it as the Shiva Linga and it became a place of worship. This was a time when the people belonging to the lower castes could not even enter the temple due to untouchability. Society felt vandalised and labelled him heretic. But he challenged the idea of untouchability and shame associated with the lower castes. Through this act, he took away the monopoly of worship from the clergy to the common man. It was a statement that no one is differentiated or discriminated in the eyes of God and the right to worship should not be a monopoly.

Narayana Guru was a religious leader who moved ahead of the boundaries of caste. His teachings and preaching were not just for his caste but for the universal enlightenment. He sort for improvement his own caste and others too. He was involved in politics but the spiritual realm was different from the political allegiances.

The discrimination enforced by Indian scriptures is challenged by countless Indian philosophers. It is banned by the legal and constitutional structures in India. The casteist differentiation can be compared to the racial discrimination but it is not exactly similar. It has got to do much about their jobs and economic status. The Holocaust was about racial purity and it also involved wiping out of any opponent, be it a communist or an opponent party member.

The reasons behind a general hatred towards Jews included the Biblical reference to Jews as the race who killed Jesus Christ along with the money lending practise of Jews. Jews controlled the financial arena of many European countries. Historically, Jews practiced the trade of money lending which was a sin according to the Bible and it also added to the hatred. It can be reflected in Elizabethan plays like Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* and Christopher Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta* can be considered as the unfair treatment and discrimination Jews faced for centuries. Holocaust was a culmination of twenty centuries when Christianity spread about in Europe topped by economic and political reasons. The role of Eugenics and medical experimentation under the leadership of Dr. Josef Mengele also played a vital role.

Both casteism and racial prejudice is a market targeted misled interpretation of science and religious scriptures. The fallacious arguments and philosophies are unfortunately still present in some minds like a centuries old tradition and it cannot be erased in one day. The study of scriptures and science research in an impartial and objective method can be the sole solution for the gradual but steady progress towards a modern and humane society. German sociologists found a legitimising historical reason through the interpretation of Indian philosophy and depending exclusively on Indian scriptures, Sree Narayan Guru found a totally different and liberate path of enlightenment which said that not just the caste system but any sort of discrimination amongst people is not acceptable in human world or in the divine realm.

It is interesting that a racial discrimination sought legitimacy from the other end of the world, the Orient, a land often considered inferior to European man, because it was a colony to one of the most powerful European countries, Britain. The easiest way to make a line look smaller is to draw a bigger line next to it (Greenblatt 42). The same complex takes place when one an individual meets another. There would be competition for resources and a never ending thirst to prove one’s superiority. It need not be an improvement

in the self but a degradation of the other that is easy. Another question of majority and market led competitions and power distribution comes into action when international political arena is considered. It is common to both Holocaust and casteism. Hence, it can be concluded that discrimination as per caste, colour, creed or political affiliation is against the fundamental human rights of an individual and no religious or spiritual philosophy indoctrinates violence against another in its essence.

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