

# From Hagiographies to Biographies: Ramanuja in Tradition and History

Ranjeeta Dutta

New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 248, Rs. 895/-, ISBN: 9780198092292.

Shobhna Sinha\*

Many histories of the medieval Bhakti movement rely upon hagiographies for substantiation. Hagiographical literature is also embedded in a historical context and, thus, can provide valuable information on several themes — the use of the *varta* literature to study the Vallabhite tradition being a case in point. Ranjeeta Dutta's project, however, is different and therein lies its immense importance. *From Hagiographies to Biographies* is a remarkable addition to the existing scholarship on medieval devotionism, as it casts a critical eye on the nature of the hagiographical intervention itself. In the process, we are also treated to a masterful study of the dynamics of sect formation (Srivaisnavas) between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries in South India. The key figure is that of Ramanuja (1017-1137), whose ideas form the basis of the Visistadvaita school of thought.

The political context to the development of the Srivaisnav *sampraday*, marked by the rule of the Cholas and the subsequent rise of regional kingdoms such as the Hoysalas and the Kakatiyas, and the emergence of the Vijayanagar empire is discussed in detail (Chapters 3 and 4). Dutta explains that with the gradual decline in the power of the *brahmadeyas*, the *mathas* developed as important players in the temple economy of the times. According to the hagiographies, Ramanuja himself was the head of the *matha* at Srirangam. In this changed environment, many non-brahman groups also became powerful. For example, communities such as the *kaikkolas* (weavers) came to be increasingly associated with temple administration. The hagiographies credit Ramanuja for starting this practice (although as Dutta points out there is no epigraphical evidence to support such claims).

Indeed, one of Dutta's primary aims in the book is to investigate the modern perception of Ramanuja as a social reformer by examining the varied representations

in the earliest hagiographies, which however have been ignored "and a fixed image of Ramanuja as a social reformer has been presented" (16). In the chapter, titled "Devotion and Dissent", the author demonstrates how even as the social base of the sect was being expanded, nevertheless the *varnasramadharm* framework was never abandoned. Moreover, the caste question was not the central question for either Ramanuja (as expressed in the commentaries he wrote) or for the hagiographers. In fact, the Smarta *brahmana* ancestry of Ramanuja is regularly drawn attention to (79). However, considering the varying notions of social reform that historians often employ, one would have liked Dutta to have included a more detailed discussion of what social reform could mean in medieval South India (even if that is not the main subject of the book).

The corollary to such essentialisation also is that often the vibrancy and the heterogeneity of religious traditions itself gets lost. In other words, along with the personality of Ramanuja, the different voices that existed at the time of the formation of the sect, reflecting the complexity of the entire process are also lost. One example of such reductionism can also be seen in the portrayal of Ramanuja's ideas of Visistadvaita as theological and less intellectual than Sankara and his Advaita, which is seen as more of a philosophical enterprise. Dutta effectively demonstrates the intellectual aspect of Visistadvaita, thereby rectifying this erroneous characterisation.

Within the Srivaisnav sect, Ramanuja had to encounter several levels of opposition, including attempts to poison him. Moreover, the evolving interpretation of his ideas (for example on the nature of *prapatti*) led to the formation of two sub-sects — the Vatakalai and the Tenkalai. Although the division had not taken place during the centuries under study, yet the different trajectories were becoming evident. The composers of the hagiographies, members of the Srivaisnav community, were also influenced

\* Assistant Professor, Bharati College, University of Delhi

by their respective affiliations (30-31). Moreover, the hagiographers themselves were selecting from an already existing (oral) corpus of stories. Thus, even as we accept the validity of hagiographies as a historical source, they cannot be used so uncritically. Dutta believes that due to the treatment of hagiographies as primarily religious texts (and therefore “non-rational”), there has been a “failure to treat hagiographies as literary texts” (213).

The author argues that the overriding purpose of hagiographers was to present Ramanuja as the ideal *acarya* — that is, knowledgeable as well as ever compassionate. Within the figure of Ramanuja, the concept of *Ubhaya Vedanta* (the coming together of the Sanskrit and the Tamil Alvar tradition) was sought to be realised. The composition of the hagiographies in Manipravalam instead of Sanskrit was also reflective of the same effort. While the Saivites had been successful at reorienting their theology to make it more inclusive, the ideology of *Ubhaya Vedanta* reflected the Srivaisnava attempts to do so. Indeed, the Saivites were not the only competitors (for patronage, devotees). The Jains, the Buddhists and the Advaitins were equally part of the devotional landscape. As she points out, this inter-sectarian competition forms a major part of the

hagiographies. The use of both epigraphical and textual evidence allows Dutta to map out the varied arenas in which this competition occurred. Other attempts to create the Srivaisnav community included the institution of new festivals in which the Alvar hymns would be sung, the establishment of pilgrimages and the elaboration of ritual.

Dutta writes eloquently and cogently across the six chapters into which the book is divided. Moreover, before launching in to any discussion, she provides the reader with a brief summary of what to expect in the coming pages. At the end, there is a short summing up. Such devices make reading easy and Dutta is able to do it in a way that does not take away from the overall elegance of the prose. However, the proof reading leaves much to be desired.

The last chapter raises several important questions and one will wait for answers in her future undertakings. Also, the similarities (as well as differences) with the hagiographical enterprise in the context of the Vaishnavite sects active in North India (especially Vrindavan) are fascinating. Perhaps Dutta could apply her considerable knowledge to such an endeavour as well.