

Anthropological Insights on ‘Siddasamajam’: A Commune in Kerala

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ABSTRACT: Now a days in India, the fission and fusion of religious pluralities forming new religious arenas is a common phenomena and mostly it is happening in the form of ‘a way of life’ with extreme flexibilities. If there is parallel disagreement in thought and action from other existing religious forms, these diversifications are constantly subjected to dialogues and criticisms and it became the responsibility of the Nation/State to safeguard and protect the interests of these groups from all sorts of challenges with the support of Indian constitution. Since there are clear gradations and inequalities between different cultures and religions in India, the conflicting experiences and socio- cultural and religious adjustments can be taken as reflective models to project the distinctiveness of cultural integration and new religious movements. This paper* is about ‘Siddasamajam’, a commune in Kerala.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian legislative system substantiated by the Constitutional provisions (with special reference to the inclusionary social elements based on impartial, liberal, and equal) gave equal consideration and safeguard to all existed and existing belief systems, institutions and new religious arrangements without any discrimination based on caste, creed and colour. This feature is accepted by all as one of the fundamental features of Indian cosmopolitanism. The support and acceptance of belief systems and practices also paved way for a level of thinking where, social inclusion has always been subjected to dialogues and discourses. The kind of an inclusionary approach, as Nussbaum (2007) opined is one of the main reasons why India has succeeded reasonably well in protecting

vulnerable minorities, withstanding severe crises and stabilizing its democratic form of governance.

Just like any other strategies and options that people have in all sphere’s of social and cultural life, religious organization also provide a number of alternatives to resolve crisis in material and non-material aspects of life. The real preference lies in the fact that one can continue one’s inborn religion with many personal and familial agreements and, if there is any disagreement with ideologies the person is free to accept a new one. This kind of an extreme suppleness within religions lead to the formation of religious pluralism with different religious groups that exemplify differing metaphysical descriptions of human existence and survival. Christopher Partridge and J. G. Melton (2004:14) had stated that “throughout religious history and within every culture, there have been reform movements, revivals and novel developments, new emphases emerge, mystical ideas evolve, fundamentalism resurge and old forms of religion die out”. Members of the newly formed groups are free to select the point at which they wish

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to practice and function, from a full time religious devotee to occasional presence at important religious functions.

In India, according to anthropological perspective, there are certainly two streams of people or followers who are trying to manipulate the socio-cultural and religious situations. One is a homogenous group endorse ideas, world views, belief system, cultural elements and codes of ethics pertaining to their cultural/religious group, and try to implement it in a shared manner. Let me call them as 'homogenists' as they try to move in par with the state's political and economic agendas obliging the principles of Indian Constitution. The other group called 'heterogenists' is provided with broad-based flexibilities for supporting people having different identities and with definite political and social agendas beyond the State or acts like a parallel government. In both the cases, the attitude of the State and its intervention is particularly important.

Now a days in India, the fission and fusion of religious pluralities forming new religious arenas is a common phenomena and mostly it is happening in the form of 'a way of life' with extreme flexibilities. This kind of a process really challenges the religion's hold to act as the significant factor of national identity and in other way it highlights the implication of this 'way of life' as part of cosmopolitanism in a country like India. If there is parallel disagreement in thought and action from other existing religious forms, these diversifications are constantly subjected to dialogues and criticisms normally by the stream of homogenists believers, but it became the responsibility of the Nation/State to safeguard and protect the interests of these groups from all sorts of challenges with the support of Indian constitution.

From an anthropological perspective it is clear that diversities created by 'homogenists' and 'heterogenists' in Indian culture are experiencing the socio-cultural environment through a strategy of inclusionary and exclusionary approaches. In Indian context inclusionary approach supports the attitude of accommodating other religious/belief systems by maintaining one's inborn religious identity and, exclusionary approach focuses on the attitude of discarding the inborn religious traits for the acceptance of a totally different one through socio-

religious and cultural adjustments. These cultural adjustments are the divergent cultural experiences that anthropologists can look into and considered as one of the significant aspects of Indian cosmopolitanism. Apart from deriving wide conceptual and theoretical generalization on cosmopolitanism, methodologically anthropologists can work with person/group centred ethnographies involved in the cosmopolitan construct especially in projecting the ethnographies of conflicting cultural models. Since there are clear gradations and inequalities between different cultures and religions in India, these conflicting experiences can be taken as reflective models to project the distinctiveness of cultural integration and new religious movements.

SIDDASAMAJAM

A Divergent Cultural Experience

As part of survival strategies, social/cultural groups all over the world have its own objectives regulated by customary laws and norms executed through institutions. Siddasamajam in India stands as a spiritual charitable commune instituted by Saint Shivananda Paramahamsar in the year 1921. This spiritual enterprise ensures a considerable amount of group solidarity and a social identity that separates its members from other societies in India. Started with very few members, the Samajam today constitute five branches in India including the head office at Vatakara, in Kerala. There are approximately two hundred and eighty members in all the five branches including the children. The co-residence group in each branch includes both kin and non-kin and all the five branches are laid out according to similar pattern.

Siddasamajam relies on the principle of universal brotherhood that all of human kind could belong to a single community. Samajam functions as a direct democracy based on new institutional form, specific moral norms, codes of conduct and customary practices. The samajam principles highlight the rights and duties of the individual members in a common social space beyond their family.

In each branch of the samajam, there is a general body of office bearers who formulate rules, regulations and policies, elects different positions, authorizes the budget and approves the entry of new

members. It serves not only as a decision making body but also as a forum where members can express their opinions and views. Day to day affairs is handled by the elected committees and this serves as the representative decision making forum in all matters. The political structure of the Samajam creates norms and regulations which is observed by the members as above the political order of the State. The state is not found involving in any of the activities of the samajam as it is considered as an independent institution. Contradictory to the formation of other systems and institutions, Siddasamajam was formed as a public zone of cultural distinctiveness and autonomy with the characteristics of an egalitarian society.

The members are not interested in establishing their electoral rights by casting votes during Assembly/Parliament elections. However it is mandatory that each member has to put his vote during the samajam elections. The members are not at all bothered about the changing state governments and their policies. Anthropologically it is clearly evident that two distinctive zones are found emerging one within the other i.e. State as a wider space with its social and territorial jurisdictions, and new religious movements like Siddasamajam as another distinct zone where the members are not mutually dependent and exercising any power relations. But the State has its own limitations under bureaucratic procedures and can be treated as a clear private realm of collectivity provided with the responsibility of protecting its components. This interpretation is substantiating the statement of Immanuel Kant who highlighted the participation of nation/states in a wider world federal structure with an ethical stance of responsibility and respect of human rights. As far as the general public and permanent residents are concerned, new socio-religious movements like Siddasamajam identify the possibility of assorted affiliations either in tune with or away from the State procedures. The emic perspectives regarding the samajam life is just contradictory to the opinions made by the general public and confined to the unique arguments and notions regarding the 'self' and the 'other'. If individuality is a social product, then the 'self' or individual in Siddasamajam is a construct derived from the collective identity of the Samajam as it is widely conventional that everyone requires a base to become a self.

Essence of Socialism in Siddasamajam

In India in the early twenty first century, globalisation has brought forward some radical changes in the nature of society, people's attitude towards new religious movements, political thoughts and ideologies. The concept of national, religious and caste boundaries are found insignificant in the interactions of people and formation of new identities. This is especially true in the case of Siddasamajam where admission is always open to all citizens irrespective of sex, caste, creed and country of origin. The principle of equality was taken as the key aspect of the Samajam democracy and the concept of private property is totally absent. The whole assets of the samajam belong to none in particular, but to all the existing without any discrepancy of caste, creed and gender. This kind of a situation supports the definition of socialism given in Oxford Dictionary ('98), that 'the community as a whole should own and control the means of production, distribution and exchange'.

Before taking admission in the samajam, one must get initiated in the basic samajam principles. After that if one decides to dedicate his or her life for the noble cause of the samajam and is ready to abide the rules, they must leave all family relations and private holding in their name and acquire a certificate from the local village officer or sub Inspector of police to the effect that he belongs to no political parties at all and submit it along with the application to the president of the samajam where he wants to join. That day onwards he will be kept under probation for a particular period as decided by the general body. When he seems fit to join, he will be enrolled as a member and treated equally and freely along with other members of the samajam. Humanity is the fundamental aspect of the samajam and differences of race, ethnicity, caste or gender have nothing to do to create any kind of obstructions between the followers of sidda principles and other human beings.

Not only property, social lives were also held in common. They believe that existence of privacy is the root cause of all miseries. There is no relations such as husband, wife, son, or daughter. According to Siddasamajam principles, these roles are only set of behaviours and attitudes associated with a particular functional position. If there is a functional part like

these designations, normally it should be associated with a counter position or part with a particular social space which automatically enforce some sort of status and function appropriate to the role so that has no difference from other societies. Lisa (2003) opines that role theories connect individual life experiences and personality to anonymous social structures and emphasize the social process of gender acquisition. They thus offer hope for more egalitarian ways of raising children and eventually organizing social life. She also point out that role theories hold out the promise that acting against stereotypes, for instance, is an effective means of changing society.

As per samajam principles, the kinds of roles and statuses are really a hindrance to achieve the ultimate goal of spirituality and they never go for practicing it. If any member is interested in proceeding a family life, they are permitted to do so but they will never be taken back at any cause and they have to leave the samajam permanently. That means, here the concept of family is not existing challenging the universality of family. This is one of the ways by which Siddasmajam, a commune with strange attitude and outlook towards divergence became anthropologically relevant. The same is true in the case of cosmopolitanism where the characteristic of possessing a particular attitude and disposition makes the difference (Hannerz, '96; Binnie, *et al.*, 2006, 2009). The principles of Samajam actually embedded in a global perspective with a new cultural outlook confining to local communities.

Agriculture is the chief means of livelihood for the inmates. Samajam is meant for one to live by his own work without depending on others. There is no compulsion in taking any work and one can attend any kind of activity in the ashram. Whatever they do, it must be done together and the outputs are enjoyed equally, and collectively. None is paid for his/her labour. Instead, their efforts are dedicated to promote the supreme cult of the samajam. The income derived out of the production and sale of ayurvedic medicines is mainly used for meeting the primary needs of the inmates (such as food, clothing, child care, education, treatment of the sick, and reception of guests) and no part of it is spent for any individual purpose. They keep accounts for all the expenditures and present it before the committee for formal approval.

Transparency is maintained in all the sectors to ensure group solidarity and trust. There is no discrimination of gender and women are given equal space with that of men and their requirements are considered with most priority.

Identity: Social and Biological

In Siddasamajam the concept of marriage and family are totally absent. Both men and women have full freedom to satisfy their biological requirements with the consent of the person they desires. Later such a desire does not ensure any affinal relation within the samajam and no legitimacy can be claimed for relationships between the inmates. As the samajam is totally free from the political affairs of the State, State power and its exercise have no implications for gender differences among the inmates. The inmates are given full freedom of thought and action subjected to samajam principles and they are not supposed to violate the rules and regulations as it is thoroughly written. This universal moral model of human community proposed by siddasamajam appears to be the philosophical basis of cosmopolitanism based on universally shared and collective human characteristics. As Rapport (2003) had stated, "cosmopolitanism would institute a social space beyond membership of cultural groups – beyond arbitrary classification – where regulation might occur of culturo-symbolical treatments of both 'own' and 'other'; the subsuming of individuals within the category of 'member' remains rhetorical only".

The birth of children in the samajam never creates any kind of ethical dilemmas. As per the samajam rules, the mother is not supposed to treat the child as her own but after birth child becomes the property of the samajam and even mothers do breast feed babies which are not of theirs. After three months of delivery, the child is shifted to the children's society called 'patashala' situated just half km away from the main building. Aged and healthy women are attending the children in the *patashala* and these children are growing without knowing the identity of their biological parents. All the children below 18 years are put together here, and after 18 years the boy or girl is shifted to one of the ashram branches or some times to the same ashram where the biological father and mother are staying. This kind of a total seclusion

for a long period generally resulting in the detachment of the individual from all relationships and resultant emotions. It is reported by the inmates that there are chances of mating between the unknown siblings and even also with their biological parents. But this kind of a practice is not considered as a sin because of its customary relevance and offers flexibility where the individual is an independent identity. As Bennie. puts it "The cosmopolite is held to possess a degree of reflexive ability which allows them to negotiate the risks and pleasures of encountering difference (Binnie, *et al.*, 2006).

It is widely accepted that the sense of religious affiliation is central to the sense of one's social identity and is ordinarily acquired during childhood in the course of primary socialization. The life of a child in the *patashala* (children's society in Siddasamajam) is almost isolated from the outside world and the children are totally unaware of other religious practices. In the *patashala* classes are given in the field of Sidda, Vedanthas and agriculture along with basic coaching in languages and other subjects including mathematics. Least importance is given to the contemporary educational system. Secondary socialization is only a continuation of the primary one without any affiliation to political, administrative and similar context outside. Hence the identity of a person is only centred on the practices offered by Siddasamajam and it is taken as the collective identity of the samajam. A single person whether it is male or female has no biological or social identity of their own but placed in the nexus of the collective identity expressed at the core of religious experiences and activities in the more secular pursuits.

CONCLUSION

To summarise, the chief characteristics of Siddasamajam as an alternative religion are strong emphasis on individual commitments to the samajam's doctrines and codes of conduct, and a focused sense of spiritual identity which is an indispensable part of collective social identity. As religion is part of culture, religious traditions are integrative of a social group as well as of the individual psyche; its representational order sometimes persuades its believers in various ways to set themselves apart from the followers of

other traditions, laying the basis for their identities. Siddasamajam principles are a total move away from other traditional forms of belief systems developed within religious institutions in India, and directed towards a belief system focus on the spiritual self and collective identity.

Siddasamajam is relevant from an anthropological perspective as it challenges the universality of family and universal definition for marriage. The 'self' here is totally a spiritual one without material possessions, private property and emotions nullifying the social and biological identities. This kind of an outlook appreciates categorical distinction as an accomplishment, a purposeful compliance, while recognizing the achievement of individual distinctiveness beyond all attachments.

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