

By AMITA KANEKAR



Rewriting History, in the Past and Today

History, they say, is written by the victors. In other words, not just written, but rewritten, or manufactured at will. I recently came across an interesting essay on an example of this by the historian Hermann Kulke, where he discusses the origins of the Sringeri Matha in the hills of western Karnataka, not very far from Goa.

For those who have not heard of it, the Sringeri Matha (mathas are monastic establishments for brahmins) has been a site of brahmanical prestige and royal endowments for the last 600 years. It was gifted with land and permitted to function as a mini-state by the Vijayanagara kings, then by their successors the Ikkeri Nayakas, followed by the Sultans Haidar and Tipu of Mysore, and finally even the British. The quasi-rule of the Matha over the region may have ended post-1947, but this has been compensated with the wider spread of brahmanical beliefs and practises in the populace; Sringeri is thus a prominent religious site for Hindus in south India today. And the region of Sringeri remains very dominated by brahmins as well, with many old agraharas (brahmin settlements) still in existence, and still owning large tracts of land.

Popular tradition gives us two origin stories about Sringeri – one, that the Matha was established around 800 CE by the Advaita philosopher Shankara (also known as Adi Shankara or Adi Shankaracharya), as one of 4 great mathas in the subcontinent; and two, that Vidyananya, a 14th century mahant of the Matha, played a crucial role in the founding of the Vijayanagara empire. As the story goes, Harihara and Bukka, the two Sangama brothers known as the founders of Vijayanagara, first converted to Islam under the Delhi Sultanate, but were then converted to Hinduism by Vidyananya who also guided them in the establishment of their kingdom.

Kulke however questions all this in his essay, 'Maharajas, Mahants and Historians: Reflections on the Historiography of early Vijayanagara and Sringeri' (1993). With respect to the origin of Sringeri, he points out that the only mention of Sringeri before the 14th century is not as a matha, but as an important Jain centre. (There are still some Jain shrines here, as well as big ones like Mudibidri and Karkala not far away.) The mention of Sringeri as a centre of Shaivism

begins only from the rise of the kingdom of Vijayanagara in the mid-14th century. Even so it is mentioned first, in the first half of the century, as only a sacred site where the Vijayanagara kings held a 'victory festival'. It gets mention as a matha only towards the end of the same century, with the Vijayanagara kings as major benefactors. And, although there are many inscriptions speaking of it from the first half of the 14th century, none of them mention Adi Shankara. His name also appears only at the end of the century in the writings of the mahant Vidyaranya.

It thus seems certain that the Matha was not in existence before the 14th century, so the question of its founding in the 9th century does not arise. And the link to Adi Shankara seems to have been deliberately made to add to the glory of the institution.

As for the 2nd story, Kulke mentions an earlier exposé by Henry Heras S. J., which pointed out that the earliest mention of the mahant Vidyaranya's role in the founding of the Vijayanagara empire dates to even later, the 16th century. And this is interestingly first mentioned in the records of, not Vijayanagara, but Sringeri. This was a time when the great Tuluva kings of Vijayanagara, Krishnadevaraya and Achyutadevaraya, had shifted their patronage to the temple of Tirupati; Kulke sees it as an attempt by Sringeri to revive its own importance within the empire.

Thus, concludes Kulke, it was probably not Vidyaranya of Sringeri who established Vijayanagara, but the opposite: the kings of Vijayanagara appear to be the patrons of a new matha at Sringeri!

It is not really surprising that even today, despite this published evidence to the contrary, the Sringeri Matha continues to be linked to Adi Shankara, not just on its own website but on government websites as well. The myth after all fits well into the Hindu-ising and brahmanising project of the Indian elites, giving as it does a greater ancestry to brahmanical dominance of the region, and also erasing the history of heterodox sects like Jainism, also any other belief systems. Voilá – Sringeri was always and originally 'Hindu'! The story of Adi Shankara's 4 mathas situated across today's India also feeds into the nationalist idea of the subcontinent being one identifiable and connected place from time immemorial; it also aids

in the construction of Hinduism as monolithic and brahmanical.



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Such a manufacture of history is not new to us in today's Goa either. We have the ongoing demonising of the Portuguese era, the attempts to push back the origins of Nagri Konkani, and the continual attempt to ignore our Islamicate and bahunjan past, and to portray Goa as a Hindu and brahmin land. The stories are all around us, whether it's the ad nauseum repetition of the myth of the hyper-brahmin Parashurama, or the glorification of any available non-Goan brahmin like Sant Sohirobanath or Shyama Prasad Mukerjee, or even the propagation of brand-new myths, as in one Panjim school which teaches that the original name of the village of Aggaçaim was Agastyapura, after the sage Agastya who visited there in some distant past that only they know about.

As can be seen at Sringeri though, the truth is not just liberating but much more interesting than all this drivel. All we need to do is fight for it.

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