

The Emergence of Modern Hinduism: Religion on the Margins of Colonialism

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Weiss' monograph challenges us to rethink Hindu modernity by examining the case of Ramalinga Swami (1824–1873), a Tamil Shaiva religious leader renowned for his devotional poetry. He was born in a village near Chidambaram into a non-Brahman family. He spent his youth in Chennai until 1857 when he returned to the place of his origin. Ramalinga was initially trained in Tamil literature. Although he received training in Tamil Shaiva texts, Vedanta and Siddhanta, he engaged neither with English nor with Sanskrit. In 1865, he established a society that offered an almshouse for the poor and a temple for worship (pp. 11–14).

Chapter One discusses the theoretical background of the monograph and its departure from prior scholarship. Weiss argues that previous scholarship failed to capture the complexity of Ramalinga's legacy because they attempted to understand him based on the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Weiss rejects this dichotomy and suggests that tradition can be modern in the sense that it can offer resources and inspirations for innovation necessary to address contemporary challenges. According to Weiss, Ramalinga's radical transformation of Tamil Shaiva tradition can be traced back to roots within the tradition itself. Thus, Weiss argues that we do not have to attribute the cause of such transformation to the impact of Western colonialism (pp. 18–26).

Chapter Two examines Ramalinga's ideology behind his practice of almsgiving to the poor. This is an example of modern Hindu practice since it sharply diverged from the traditional practice of giving to those who are esteemed. Tracing the genealogy of this divergence, scholars such as Srilata Raman (2013) argue that Ramalinga's focus on the poor points to a clear influence of Christianity on him. Although not rejecting such possibility Weiss suggests that the sources of Ramalinga's innovation can be best understood within "traditional" frameworks such as Shaiva devotion (*bhakti*), Shaiva theology (*siddhanta*), and the South Indian practice of food distribution (*chattram*) (pp. 36–46). Therefore, Ramalinga's radical practice, Weiss argues, points to "entangled histories of diverse ideologies and institutions (p. 45)" and it cannot be reduced the encounter between two distinct cultures – namely Western modernity and Hindu tradition (p. 51).

Chapter Three explores the printing of Ramalinga's *Tiruvirutpā* in 1867. Hindu reformers employed printing technology to make the canonical texts accessible to the masses, and to rationalize Hinduism in line with Protestant sensitivities. In contrast, with the same technology Ramalinga's followers attempted to canonize his devotional poems. They did so by deliberately presenting Ramalinga's writings in the way that resembled the printing of classical Shaiva canons (pp. 54–56). For his followers, Ramalinga was Shiva himself, and his writing equal to the Vedas (pp. 67–68). Ramalinga's poems were traditional in the sense that they clearly echoed the writings of previous Tamil Shaiva saints. At the same time, the publication of his poems was modern in the sense that it challenged the established norm of canonicity in Tamil Shaiva literature. Thus the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity collapses in this case as well (pp. 70–72).

In the fourth chapter, Weiss examines Ramalinga's devotional poems contained in the 1867 publication. In these poems Ramalinga portrayed his direct encounters and intimate personal relationship

with Shiva (pp. 83–84). Weiss argues that these hagiographical portrayals allowed Ramalinga to advance his leadership claim outside established institutions. His authority was further enhanced by the fact that Ramalinga's poetry employed the language and the literary convention of Tamil Shaiva canons such as the *Tēvāram* and the *nālvar-s'* poems. Ramalinga's poems also promoted simple ritual practices such as the marking of one's body with ash and the chanting of a short Shaiva *mantra* (pp. 93–94). Through these practices, Weiss suggests, Ramalinga advocated a more egalitarian form of Shaivism that was free from class hierarchy and from the control of established institutions.

The fifth chapter explores the controversy between Arumuga Navalar (1822–1879) and Ramalinga's followers that ensued after the publication of Ramalinga's 1867 publication. Through the interaction with Christian missionaries Navalar developed a vision of Shavism that was influenced by the Protestant notion of religious authority centered on scripture (pp. 99–102). Navalar argued that only those revelations and miracles in scripture were authentic, which occurred in the premodern period. According to Navalar, Ramalinga's poems could not be counted as a new form of revelation, nor could the miracles which Ramalinga claimed to have performed be real (pp. 105–14). Ramalinga's followers rejected Navalar's criticism by arguing that in limiting revelations and miracles only to the premodern period Navalar was essentially rejecting the accessibility of Shiva's grace in modern time (pp. 114–18).

In the last chapter, Weiss examines the revolutionary aspect of Ramalinga's legacy. The initial publication of his poems in 1867 established Ramalinga as a conventional Shaiva devotee. In contrast, the poems published posthumously in 1885 emphasized Ramalinga as a *siddha* who possessed miraculous powers (the *siddhis*), and who criticized textual elitism, social hierarchy, and ritual exclusivism of established Shaiva institutions (pp. 122–23). Ramalinga's miraculous powers included procuring gold, resurrecting the dead, and attaining immortality (pp. 128–31). Ramalinga taught that through Shiva's grace anyone could access these miracles if they joined the Society of the True Path that he established in 1865. This "democratization of the *siddhis*" (p. 131) was central to Ramalinga's strategy to legitimate his society as well as to discredit the efficacy of other religious traditions including older Shaiva establishments (pp. 136–41). Weiss points out that Ramalinga's vision of enchanted modernity was different from those of cosmopolitan reformers such as Rammohan Roy, who embraced the Western form of disenchanting modernity (pp. 146–47).

Weiss concludes that the case of Ramalinga is significant as it offers an alternative mode of Hindu modernity, which is not conditioned by "idioms of dialogue or encounter between Indians and Westerners (p. 149)." Ramalinga used traditional Shaiva texts and concepts as the source of innovation to address the challenges of his day. In other words, his innovations were not directly prompted by the colonial influences. Thus Ramalinga demonstrated that a tradition could be innovative, transformative, and thus even modern by itself (pp. 148–53).

Scholarship on Hindu modernity has tended to focus on Northern thinkers such as Rammohan Roy, Debendranath Tagore, Keshub Chandra Sen, and Dayananda Saraswati. The current monograph is valuable as it introduces the readers to a view from the South by examining the legacy of Ramalinga Swami, who was active in Tamil Nadu. It also prompts us to think of an aspect of Hindu modernity that was not so much of a rupture but more of a continuation. With these observations I would like to offer the following three reflections.

First, the monograph could have benefitted from pointing out aspects of continuity in the discourses of thinkers to which the case of Ramalinga might be compared. Weiss repeatedly portrays Ramalinga as a regional figure who was rooted in tradition. This is contrasted with better-known Northern cosmopolitan Hindu reformers, whose vision of Hinduism was, according to Weiss, conditioned by the Western mode of rationality and disenchantment. It is true that those cosmopolitan reformers were significantly influenced by their encounter with the West. However, important aspects of their discourses were rooted in tradition as well. For example, Rammohan Roy produced a Bengali commentary on the *Brahmasūtras* to promote his version of Vedāntic monotheism (Killingley 1981). This suggests that Roy accepted the traditional authority of the *sūtras*, and exploited them to legitimate his new ideas. Swami Vivekananda, a paragon of cosmopolitan Hindu reformers, offers another example. Paul Hacker (1995) describes Vivekananda as a "Neo-Hindu," emphasizing that Western influences on

him prompted him to depart from traditional Advaita Vedānta. Ayon Maharaj (2020) however, argues that Vivekananda's practical Vedānta can be directly traced to Vijñāna Vedānta of Sri Ramakrishna. These cases demonstrate that, like Ramalinga, the innovations of the northern cosmopolitan thinkers were also rooted in the tradition, at least in some aspects. By pointing out these parallels between Ramalinga and cosmopolitan thinkers Weiss could have drawn the reader's attention to the traditional aspects of cosmopolitan thinkers, which have received less scholarly attention so far. Such an argument would have made Ramalinga more relevant to the general discussion of Hindu modernity as well.

Second, an alternative definition of modernity Weiss suggests becomes so expansive that it loses its meaning as a term for designating a particular time period, primarily referring to the nineteenth and the twentieth century. Weiss writes: "I have defined modern actors as those who were aware of the unique challenges of their present, willing to innovate in response to those challenges, and oriented their actions in anticipation of future trends. This broader view has allowed me to highlight the transformative, modernizing capacities of tradition [...] (p. 148)." Weiss argues that the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity is misleading, which earlier scholars employed as the basic paradigm to analyze Ramalinga's legacy. By offering an elastic definition of modernity Weiss attempts to overcome this dichotomy, and his point is well taken. However, with such an expansive view of modernity it seems that the entire history of Hinduism could qualify as being modern. *Bhagavadgītā*, for example, offers a soteriological path that is open to all without rejecting the Brahmanical values of social hierarchy and respective duties prescribed to each class (cf. *Gītā* 9.32: *striyo vaiśyās tathā śūdrās te 'pi yānti parāṃ gatim* "Women, merchants and servants, they too reach the supreme destination"). This could be seen as a Brahmanical innovation to respond to the Jain and Buddhist traditions that rejected social hierarchy (Malinar 2007, p. 260). The authors of the *Gītā* may then qualify as "modern actors" in the sense defined by Weiss. If a text that was written by the first century CE (Malinar 2007, p. 15) could be described as modern, the concept of modernity as a term for periodization becomes meaningless.

Third, the author could have offered a more robust discussion on the concept of modernity. Like many other scholars Weiss accepts disenchantment and the resultant rejection of magic and miracles as the defining characteristics of Western modernity. According to Weiss, therefore, Ramalinga is significant as he provided an alternative vision of enchanted modernity. Josephson-Storm (2017), however, argues that the idea of disenchantment is itself a myth that early modern European intellectuals created. Although this modern myth has been extremely influential Josephson-Storm maintains that beliefs in magic and miracles never declined, and that Western modernity has been always enchanted. If the main thrust of Josephson-Storm's thesis is correct then Ramalinga's vision of enchanted modernity could be seen as a norm rather than an exception at periphery.

These reflections do not detract from the excellence of Weiss' contribution. The monograph is well researched and highly readable. It is recommended to anyone interested in topics such as Hinduism, modern Indian history, and Colonial Studies.

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