

The *Darśanasāra* by Devasena

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1. Introduction

The *Darśanasāra* is a tenth century text written by the Mūla Saṅgha Digambara *ācārya* Devasena. The text consists of fifty-one Prakrit *gāthās* and is mainly devoted to the refutation of beliefs of religious communities (*saṅghas*), namely the Buddhists, the Śvetāmbaras, the Viparītavādins, the Vainayikas, the Ajñānavādins, the Drāviḍa Saṅgha, the Yāpanīyas, the Kāṣṭha Saṅgha, the Mathurā Saṅgha and the Bhillaka Saṅgha. Especially interesting to the *Darśanasāra* is that it names three Digambara *saṅghas* and gives for each of them the names of their founders, the dates of their foundation and the place where it was founded. Moreover, for some *saṅghas* the *Darśanasāra* is the only source in which something is said about the practices or beliefs of these traditions. There is only one study that centres on the *Darśanasāra* itself, written by Premi (1917). His paper contains the original Prakrit text, a Sanskrit *chāyā* and also a Hindi paraphrase.

Like Premi's study all references to the *Darśanasāra* up to now see it as a text that is important primarily for our knowledge on the historical evolution of the Digambara traditions. I claim however that we should look at the text from a different perspective, namely as one that gives more attention to the role of the author.

The 'alternative' reading I suggest, uses the process of 'othering', a concept largely developed by Jonathan Z. Smith. This perspective centres on how one *ācārya* of the Jain community, Devasena, and his affiliation, the Mūla saṅgha of the Digambaras, portrayed their 'others' and how he and the *saṅgha* identified themselves through that.

In this paper I will explain the above described 'alternative' reading, a reading that does not see the text as a positivist historical source, but as a source of historical identity formation.

2. Critical Study: The Other as Mirror to the Self

2.1 The theory of 'othering'.

The concern with the 'other' and with 'difference', starting in the 1970s and 80s, came from the increasing belief that a definition of identity should be a dialectal, non-essential one and so a growing number of studies on religion "started to question how religious communities saw themselves though their others, how they have been dealing with the problem of these others, or how religious communities have been articulating a distinct identity in relation to these very others" (Maes 2016: 536).¹ Indeed the identity of a religious community like the Jains is never constructed in isolation from its others in the South Asian world.

It is in this light that I wanted to use the process of othering as a methodological tool in reading the *Darśanasāra*. 'Othering' is here defined as the on-going dynamic process of placing sameness and difference while negotiating one's identity (definition from Maes 2016: 535). This can be the individual's identity as well as the collective identity of a community. The identity of a person or a group

¹ See e.g. Folkert [1975–1989] (1993); Neusner and Frerichs [eds] (1985). More recently there is Krämer et al. (2010) and specifically for Jain Studies there is Cort [ed.] (1998).

is constructed and continuously adjusted by relating, in terms of sameness or difference, to the subjects of this environment. For the Jain community this means that it developed its notion of the self in constant dialogue with its environment. It is indeed exactly from the perspective of ‘othering’ that one can acknowledge that the idea of *the* Jain tradition should be modified, because whatever falls under the denomination of Jainism is not a static, single entity, but a diverse group that continuously negotiates and reflects on what establishes this group in opposition to others.

Already in itself, the *Darśanasāra* of Devasena supports the fact that the Jain community is diverse, because it directly names several Jain *saṅghas*. What is more, the *Darśanasāra* is an ideal text to analyse through the methodology of ‘othering’, as it almost exclusively talks about others (Jains and non-Jains).

The term ‘othering’ implies that there should be someone or something that is in opposition with another. But what is this other? The other does not exist without the self. He is always generated by the opposition in/out. The other exists only because the self wants to draw boundaries and wants to limit what is to be contained within the self and what is to be excluded from the self (Smith 2004). So when Devasena is disapproving of several communities, he is actually showing what kind of communities (with their specific behavioural characteristics) cannot be included within his own *saṅgha*. Creating these boundaries is not something that is typical for religious communities only. It is in fact central to every identity formation, because in a sense, there cannot be a self without a notion of the other (the non-self).

What is more, with respect to drawing boundaries there is also the idea of pollution that plays its part. The other is not only what lies outside of the self, but also what is threatening to the self. There is always the danger that the polluting other will cross the boundaries and affect the self (Smith 2004: 231). This notion of pollution can be seen in the introduction of the *Darśanasāra* when it says that first there was the pure path of the *Tīrthaṅkaras*, but then there were some who proclaimed false beliefs and in the statement that there is damage to the path of right belief. To protect the boundaries of the self, as a community or an individual, the self needs to continuously reclaim or adjust its boundaries. And this can be done, not just by stating one’s own position, but by characterizing the other.

Ascribing a certain (cultural) trait to another is not only “a rhetorical act for taking one marked feature for the whole” (Smith 2004: 232). In the description of the other lies “a complex structure of reciprocal determination” (Smith 2004: 232). The ascribed label should also correlate to some piece of the self that is believed to prominently display the self’s identity. Only in this way the difference of the other is significant and meaningful. When one symbolizes the other by a certain characteristic it is partly a matter of domination, but it is even more a “means by which societies explore their internal ambiguities and interstices, experiment with alternative values ... and question their own structures and mechanisms” (Smith 2004: 233).

Having looked at the theoretical framework, I now want to make a preliminary exploration of what this can mean for the content of the *Darśanasāra*.

2.2 Reciprocal Characterization of Devasena’s Others

In the text Devasena describes the Mathurā Sangha in the following way :

Then after 200 years there was in Mathurā a guru of the Mathurā Saṅgha named Rāmasena. He praised ‘the not carrying of a chowrie’ (v. 40, my tr.).

This is the first verse he writes on this *saṅgha*. Logically what comes first is that with which an

author wants to characterize the other the most. The fact that he says that the members of the Mathurā Saṅgha do not carry a chowrie, does not mean that this cultural trait is the most important identity-marker for the Mathura Saṅgha itself. It merely means that this characteristic must be important for Devasena. His statement implies an internal ambiguity on this topic within his own *saṅgha*. Going even further, by establishing the other (the not-self) as those who do not carry a chowrie, Devasena establishes his own *saṅgha* as those who do carry a chowrie. Devasena takes ‘the chowrie’ as a marker of difference, because he wants to do away with any doubt about carrying a chowrie in his own *saṅgha*. He wants to contain and reclaim the identity of his *saṅgha* as those who carry a chowrie of peacock feathers.

Something that recurs several times in the text is that his others wear clothes (vv. 7, 14 and 29). This is said of the Buddhist, the Śvetāmbaras and the Yāpanīyas. If, following Smith, this representation of the other implies a reciprocal relation, then it means that Devasena and his community did not wear clothes, they were naked. Moreover it means that this nakedness was a piece of the self that prominently displayed their identity. If it was not seen as an important part of the self, then Devasena would not have mentioned this mark of difference so many times. Another important feature of the Mūla Saṅgha, at least according to Devasena, is their dietary habits. Some products cannot be eaten on the grounds of having a soul. Indeed, Devasena refutes the Buddhists because they eat fish, meat, yoghurt, etc., believing that these products do not have a soul (vv. 6–7). This statement may sound surprising and contrary to common knowledge of ‘the’ Buddhists. But to be clear, Devasena’s words do not indicate that Buddhists in the tenth century actually ate meat, fish, etc. It solely indicates that Devasena and his community did not or should not eat these products.

From applying the idea of reflexivity in the process of ‘othering’ on the marks mentioned in the text, I can further conclude that in Devasena’s idea of the Mūla Saṅgha the community’s specific identity is determined by not believing that women can attain liberation in this life (v. 13), not believing in a creator (v. 13), following the doctrine of manifold aspects (*anekāntavāda*, v. 5), adhering to a certain corpus of texts, not having a fixed abode (v. 27), not participating in trade or agriculture (v. 27), having a strict (vegetarian) diet (vv. 5 and 25), wearing no clothes, etc. (vv. 7, 14 and 29)

The last aspect of the Mūla Saṅgha I want to mention as being important according to the text is carrying a chowrie of peacock feathers. Of the Kāṣṭha and Mathurā Saṅgha Devasena respectively says that they carry a chowrie of a yak’s tail and carry no chowrie at all (vv. 34 and 40). In fact the Kāṣṭhas were sometimes called the Gopucchikas (“those having a bovine chowrie”) and the Māthurās were called the Niṣpicchas (“those without chowrie”) by the monks of the Mūla Saṅgha. These metonymical denominations and Devasena’s words show that there was a discussion about the chowrie within the Digambara community and probably also within the Mūla Saṅgha. Indeed the Kāṣṭhas did have a well-founded argument that a whisk made out of a cow’s tail is less adhesive and less likely to pick up small insects than one made out of peacock feathers, thus minimising injury to life-forms. And the Māthurās had a fair claim that carrying no chowrie accords better to the rule that monks should have no possessions at all (Dundas 2002: 122). The Mūla Saṅgha must have debated around this topic and then concluded that they would carry a whisk of peacock feathers unlike their others. ‘Othering’ the Kāṣṭhas and Māthurās, as in the *Darśanasāra*, shows the concern of the Mūla Saṅgha with the chowrie as part of their identity.

3. Conclusion

At first sight the *Darśanasāra* by Devasena seems to be a text that objectively describes several historical *saṅghas*. But there is a problem: because Devasena writes from the opponent's perspective, we cannot be sure that what he writes about these *saṅghas* is historically true. Therefore, I chose to probe a different approach, that would centre around the conceptual position of the author.

This I found with the theory of 'othering'. Devasena writes only about his others and this in a negative way; he is explicitly putting his others at a distance. But, the portrait he draws of his others cannot be seen as truthful. We have to assess his words in the light of the reciprocal relationship that exists between the self (Devasena) and the other (the mentioned *saṅghas*). Because, when you talk about others, you will always do this in your own terms. This is not anything different for Devasena: he describes the other *saṅghas* in his terms, what he ascribes to them is defined by what is important for himself. The beliefs and behavioural characteristics that Devasena calls refutable, show what aspects of his own identity (or the identity of his *saṅgha*) he finds important and wants to ascertain.

This approach is in my opinion an approach from which one can display features of the *Darśanasāra* that are plainly relevant. From what Devasena writes it cannot be concluded that this *saṅgha* acts in this way or believes these things. For example, it is not because Devasena writes that the Buddhists ate fish, that they also actually did eat fish. The only facts that can be said about the text are Devasena's representations, what he himself found to be wrong behaviour or beliefs. Taking the *Darśanasāra* as an example I want to argue for an approach to texts describing historical others, that focuses on the position of the author, because such texts can teach us more about the identity formation of the author (and his surrounding group) than about the identity of the groups that the author describes.

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