

VALDAS JASKŪNAS
(Vilnius)

‘Insolent’ Makers of the World: Identity Formation Practices of South Indian Artisans

Abstract

The present paper sets out to explore the historically mutable and disputable grounds of social identity of the South Indian artisans and artists, or Viśvakarmas, by analyzing the practices of caste mobility and assumption of higher status as traced in classical sources, as well as judicial cases from colonial Madras. The primary intention herein is to investigate the historical shifts in identity-formation of the Viśvakarmas’ which provide an interpretational framework for contemporary strategies of identity construction. It is argued that dominant treatment of Indian artists, as being of very low social rank, is disapproved by a set of long-lasting rhetoric and pragmatic practices dated back to medieval period that pertain to legitimized uprise of social status of the Viśvakarmas, and even rivaling the ritual functions of the Brāhmaṇs.

Introduction

It is almost obvious for an indologist to consider the history of Indian art rather as an arena of change and sustainability of visual ideas and imageries than a process propelled by individual expression and artistry. This deeply rooted attitude has permeated writings on Indian art to such a degree that the question of individual artistry has been considered almost as an occidental triviality supposedly alien to Indian traditional culture. Instead, the history of Indian art was heaped with uninformed use of such description as ‘anonymous’ and ‘individual’. Such writers on Indian art as George C.M. Birdwood, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Percy Brown, Benjamin Rowland, and B.N. Goswamy more or less contributed or at least explored the ‘anonymity’ of Indian art without any serious deliberation. As a fact, regular histories of Indian art are almost univocally silent

about its producers, although classical Indian texts – be it treatises on architecture and sculpture, legal texts or other records – abound in references to the artists and their practices throughout the centuries.

Although art historians differed in arguing the ‘anonymity’ of Indian art, seemingly the ignorance of artists in the history of Indian art pertains rather to some ideological reasons than to a natural course of knowledge about the subject. It would be merely an oversimplification to assign this attitude to the inconsistencies of colonial art historiography since already in the pre-colonial period controversial relations between its actors, traditional artists, on the one hand, and Brāhmaṇs as transmitters of artistic knowledge, on the other, can be discerned. In the studies of Indian society these relations are predominantly analysed as a social inconsistency based on distinction of castes. However, there are artistic and socio-economic practices, such as temple building and management, in which occupation of artists and artisans happen to be highly concomitant with those of the Brāhmaṇs and, in spite of social hierarchies, the interdependence of these groups is explicitly set to impel the need of social rival.

Regarding the status of Indian artists and artisans, collectively called Viśvakarmas (Skr. ‘Makers of the World’), their belonging to the very low stratum of traditional India has been usually taken for granted. Perhaps the backward position of the artisans was more crucial for the art historians to concentrate on greatness of Indian art produced by these artisans or artists rather than to talk about the very creators of that greatness. Regardless of a few attempts to focus on the artists themselves (Coomaraswamy 1909; Kramrisch 1958) that also turned to be rather a eulogy of uniqueness of artistic imagination, most of the scholars keep mute of producers of Indian art. Therefore the attempts of the artisans and artists to claim for higher social status that are tracable back to the early medieval period as well as debates of the Viśvakarmas’ social status and practices so frequent over the colonial period, especially in South India, seem to be strikingly incompatible with how the artisans are usually treated.

The present paper, thus, sets out to explore the historically mutable and disputable grounds of the South Indian Viśvakarmas’ social identity. The shift of question from *what* is the status of the traditional Indian artist to *how* is the status of the artist socially constructed, was first posited by Samuel K. Parker (2003). When following theoretical framework of Parker’s arguments based on de-essentialization of the discourse attained by ethnographic investigation of diverse sets of social representations of the artists, my primary intention is to explore the historical shifts in identity-formation practices of the Viśvakarmas’ which provide an interpretational framework for contemporary strategies of identity construction.

Even though artisans in classical texts are considered as being of a very low social rank, it can be felt that the authors of these texts confronted a problem of relegating the castes of the artisans to the bottom of social hierarchy and reflect their claims for higher position which is documented to be held in society. Hence although I generally refrain from elaborating on references to the status of the Viśvakarmas in classical sources, the attempts, resulting perhaps from the economical and social practice, to reconsider

their social position are dealt with to the extent they enable us to explain historical transformations of attitude towards the artisans and artists. Therefore, what is discernable when looked at the history of social – and particularly professional – relations between the Viśvakarmas and their rivals, the Brāhmaṇs, is, as Parker rightly argues, that the South Indian traditional artists ‘in concrete practices reveal their identity to be a social construction, realized in a fluid context of ongoing public negotiations’ and basically rhetorically and pragmatically manufactured (Parker 2003: 125 and 129).

The arguments for mutability of social status of the Viśvakarmas come from the assumptions laid out by Burton Stein, bearing upon the process of social mobility in medieval Hindu India, primarily as an adoption of higher roles and statuses by law-caste Hindus (Stein 2004: 84). The investigations on the caste mobility demonstrate that mobility was not corporate, or the movement of an entire *jati*, but rather a matter of individual families. Furthermore, there can be identified two major trends in change of the caste identification, the first being related to the religious affiliation, as it was the case with the Śrīvaiṣṇava bhakti movement in South India, especially in the practices of sect-managed temples, while the other can be associated with certain professional skills, that can be discerned from the caste mobility and assumption of higher status among the warriors or different groups of artists and artisans. In both cases the upgrade of social status was achieved in part at the expense of previous social and religious monopoly of Brāhmaṇs by challenging their exclusive control over religion and ritual, which naturally fueled their dissatisfaction. Despite the frequent failure to maintain their improved higher social position by lower castes, the legal practice from the 11th century onwards commenced to codify the caste improvement to legitimize, supposedly, unavoidable cases as it happened with the temple builders – artists and artisans.

Social ranking of the Viśvakarmas

The Viśvakarmas in medieval South India constituted a community (*kula*) comprising five socially and economically differentiated castes – goldsmiths, brass smiths, blacksmiths, carpenters and masons. Caste distinctions and affiliation to an individual caste certainly seem to preponderate, however what admittedly united these five groups was work of temple building which cut across separate caste identities.¹

They were known in the Tamil country as Kammālar, in Karnataka as Pañcalar and in Andhra as the Pañcanamuvaru. It is also known from the medieval inscriptions that they were collectively referred to as the Rathakāras who enjoyed a high status in society and even rivaled Brāhmaṇs at a period from the 10th century onward when the

¹ The same tendency of diversification among the Viśvakarma castes is traced in North India, particularly in Banaras. The name ‘Viśvakarma’ in Banaras refers to occupation rather than to caste. To put it in the words of Nita Kumar, in principle, it is a ‘caste cluster’ with every group within it endogamous, or trying to remain so. Viśvakarmas because of their diversity in occupation and social standing, have never had an informal unity of a strength. See Kumar 1995: 204–206.

region witnessed a boom of temple building (Derrett 1997: 87). The period from the 10th to the 12th centuries – the middle Chola phase – witnessed the decline of Brāhmaṇ influence due to growth in power of craft communities, which resulted in first corporate representation of Viśvakarma craftsmen that appear in inscriptions (Ramaswamy 2004: 556–557). The growth of influence of craftsmen seemingly cut across the borders of function traditionally attributed to the higher castes. When judged from the inscriptional records as well as legal literature which deals with settling the rights and duties of the Rathakāras, the latter were probably to some extent challenging ritual functions of the Brāhmaṇs, because, although being of mixed caste, primarily *anuloma* (i.e., born of a high-born father and a low-born mother), they were entitled to the thread ceremony, allowed to study, but not to teach, Vedic scriptures, perform sacrificial rites connected with the architectural practice, and make offerings (ibid., 92). Ramaswamy maintains that classification of the Rathakāras as *anuloma* and *pratiloma* (i.e., born of a high-born mother and a low-born father) – the latter were fit only to perform menial tasks like feeding and training horses and deprived of any ritual tasks – depended on the nature of job and provided 'ritual sanction for the socio-economic differentiation that already existed among the prosperous architects and jewelers on the one hand and the poor village smiths on the other' (Ramaswamy 2004: 567).²

Scanty references to the ancient artisanal practice suggest that artisan communities may have been among the most vigorous in their efforts to negotiate public recognition of their claims to higher status. According to John Freyer, a seventeenth century traveler to the Vijayanagara kingdom, the castes of artisans and artists used to be the most 'insolent' towards their superiors (quoted from Parker 2003: 129). Traditionally the community of the artisans was considered to be descended from Brahmā in the form of the divine craftsman Viśvakarma. However the *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa* I.X.19–90 recounts the fall of the artist from his once exalted position due to the curse. According to this text, Viśvakarma, born as a Brāhmaṇ craftsman, and an Apsarā Ghṛtācī, born as a śūdrā woman, had as illegitimate sons nine types of śilpakārins – kamśakāra (a worker in white copper or brass), karmakāra (a blacksmith), kumbhakāra (a potter), kuvindaka (a weaver), mālākāra (a garland maker), śaṅkhakāra (a conch-shell carver), citrakāra (a painter), sūtradhāra (an architect or carpenter), and svarṇakāra (a goldsmith). All of them were relegated to śūdras on account of their mixed parentage, though a characteristic feature is that the first six are described as *śilpināṃ varāḥ*, whereas the last three are said to be degraded (*ayājya* and *patita*) as a result of a curse by Brāhmaṇs (Rocher 1986). As Rocher rightly draws attention, the passage is unique in mentioning not merely mixed castes that are commonly found in other descriptions, but rather a large number of castes that so far have not been known from any other source. This fact most probably refers to

² The Dharmasūtras differ in classifying the Rathakāras. Although the *Baudhayanadharmasūtra* acknowledges that an offspring of a Vaiśya male from a Śūdra female belongs to this caste, the *Vaikhānasasmārtasūtra* states that a Rathakāra is an outcome of the Kṣatriya male and a Brāhmaṇ female without any lawful marriage between them. According to the latter text, a Rathakāra misses the privilege of being twice-born and does not obtain the status of a Kṣatriya and therefore follows the occupation of a Śūdra (Patkar 1965: 234).

a specific attempt of codification of legal practices in treatment of the artists and artisans which could be traced in the history of Dharmaśāstra (Rocher 1986).³

The method of describing the respectability of mixed castes by identifying to which varṇa belongs the male, closely follows the system of social superiority as symbolized by relation of the categories of male and female to the four social categories or varṇas. This system is based on association of the two sides of body with two sexes as the iconographical representation of Śiva as Ardhanarīśvara exemplifies, where the left is interpreted as being female and the right as male. The imposition of this association on the 'social body' resulted in considering the higher varṇa in opposition to the lower as male to female. Thus Brāhmaṇs are male in relation to Kṣatriyas, however when Kṣatriyas are described vis-à-vis the lower Vaiśya varṇa, then the former are spoken of as male (Beck 1970: 784).

One of the means to negotiate the upgrade of social status by Viśvakarmas was attributing the honorary titles to their proper names. The titles of *ācāri* ('teacher') or other of equal status-denotation are traced back to the 6th century. Although information about the artists in medieval India is scarce, there are evidences that the Hoysaḷa (c. A.D. 1022–1310) artists were referred to in the epigraphical records by adding to their names suffixes or preffixes such as *ācāri* ('teacher') and *ōja* (as derived from the Sanskrit *upādhyāya*, 'a teacher of the Veda') (Collier 1990: 54–55). Furthermore, although the Hoysaḷa artists were members of the forth or lowest varṇa known as śūdras, and as such were the servants of the other three castes they are never referred to by this term in the inscriptions (Collier 1990: 64). The name suffix *-ācāri* is common in the records from the Tamil country, e.g. Revācāri, Samundācāri, and when the record is from Andhra or Karnataka, the names are usually suffixed by *-ōja*, for example, Mallōja (Ramawamy 2004: 559). The suffix *-ōja* was also used by the Bādāmi Chalukya (ca. A.D. 550–750) artists (Bolon 1988: 54), while the tilte *ācārya* is found in some inscriptions with reference to the architects of the temples (Bolon 1988: 61). The suffixes *-ōju*, *-ācāri* or *-ācārya*, attached to the names of the śilpis (sculptors, engravers, architects, etc) were also in practice in Andhra from the 9th century onwards (Reddy 2000: ii). The alternative to *-ācāri* types of terms are *bhaṭṭa* and *karmiyar*. In inscriptions both are used for Brāhmaṇ priests and craftsmen despite the fact that most craftsmen in South India were śūdras.

There is also the term 'Viśvabrāhmaṇ' – an exalted title – that is normally used to emphasize the greatness of the community, on the one hand, and to distinguish between the 'Viśva-brāhmaṇ' or 'universal Brāhmaṇ', the Viśvakarma, and the ordinary Brāhmaṇ hence called 'Go-Brāhmaṇ', on the other.

The claims of Viśvakarmas for Brahmanical status have also a textual legacy. One of such texts is the *Viśvakarma-purāṇa* – an anonymous work in Tamil comprising stories and

³ For further investigation of related legal practices, see, for example, Richard W. L. Riviere's 'Dharmaśāstra, Custom, "Real Law" and "Apocryphal" Smṛtis', *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 (2004): 611–627; and Albrecht Wezler's 'Dharma in the Vedas and the Dharmaśāstras', *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 (2004): 629–654.

local legends which was compiled most probably during the East India Company period in the 18th century. The origin myth of the Viśvakarmas points out that god Viśvakarma was born wearing the sacred thread (R a m a s w a m y 2004: 564).

Division of castes and its narratives in South India

In South India social organization and mobility among castes is embedded in a paradigm of right and left hand divisions. This division, the first mention of which is found in the inscription dated from the 11th century, is peculiar to the Tamil-, Telugu-, and Kanada-speaking areas of South India. Overall it is difficult to determine the cases belonging to each of the castes with certainty; there are castes associated with opposite divisions in different regions as well as castes maintaining their neutrality. Usually the right block of castes was dominated by rural landlords, while the left block was led by artisans – number of communities that lived mainly by their professional expertise and were called Panchalar in Telugu and Kammalan in Tamil. It is worth noting that Brāhmaṇs were considered to be above the division and the bifurcation began with the middle range of castes.

The origin of division into right and left hand castes is obscured. Burton Stein considering the meaning of the division generally treats it as the opposition between settled peasants and mobile artisans. His central argument explains this grouping as a long-term rise in the status of artisans which has been propelled by the temple-oriented practices from the late Chola period onwards (Stein 1980: 173f). As a fact these practices were originally ritual wise, hence social identity of artisans has been gradually substantiated by references to ritual purity. Here Stein's arguments derive from the framework of behavioral transaction in South Indian society described by McKim Marriott. She has recognized the characteristic behavioral transaction of left-hand castes that pertains to emphasizing the primordial universality, independence and self-sufficiency (Marriott 1976). On these grounds Viśvakarmas locate themselves in a social position of 'ritual centrality' vis-à-vis their patron's dependence on their technological knowledge and professional skills.

The claims for or even actual reversal of the castes are well known cases, however within the right-left division eventually the refusal of others' supremacy and claiming for higher rank is characteristic to left castes who emulate the Brāhmaṇ model and render themselves to distinctiveness vis-à-vis other groups (Beck 1970: 787). With reference to the artisans, the reversal of the caste is executed by taking over priestly rights of the Brāhmaṇs in the temples of village goddesses (Brouwer 1995: 201).

Although usually all the artisans are considered to belong to a Viśvakarma caste, the latter is, as Brouwer rightly puts it, 'not a group into which one is born but an ideal subscribed to by sub-castes in which the artisan is born' (Brouwer 1992: 433). The break-up of the caste's unity is explained in the legends that provide the narratives of division of the allegedly once united and pure caste. The unity of the caste is presented

as an ideal which follows the Brahmanical order in legitimising itself by reference to the originator of the caste, the five-headed god Viśvakarman (Brouwer 1992: 334).

A legend concerned with the social position of the Panchalars, or Viśvakarmas, is known as that of the Magnetic Fort. Two most widely spread discrete versions are known from the oral tradition in South India. The legend, popular in the norther region of Karnataka, tells the following story. Once the Viśvakarmas, instigated by the hatred of kings for their skills and capabilities, built a well-protected fort that could not be destroyed by anything but by means of *haraka* grass. Viśvakarmas led a very religious and pure life there – they were learning and teaching Vedas and thus enjoyed high esteem. Brāhmaṇs became jealous and one of them, Vedavyāsa by name, devised a plan of conquering the fort by trick. Vedavyāsa had a beautiful daughter, who was convinced to seduce one of the Viśvakarma gatekeepers and to fetch the secret of the fort from him. A gatekeeper, as expected, felt in love with her and took her home. One night, when the gatekeeper was sleeping, she raised an alarm that the fort was burning, to which the gatekeeper asked who had brought the *haraka* grass and thus revealed the secret. The next day she returned home and told Vedavyāsa the secret of the fort. Vedavyāsa without delay burned the fort with the *haraka* grass and made the Viśvakarmas, particularly goldsmiths, flee the fort. Others remained, of whom most were blacksmiths and carpenters. Later, those who fled, came back as ‘latercomers’ and stayed with the so-called ‘ancestors’, or those Viśvakarmas who had not escaped from the fort (Brouwer 1995: 217–218).

The narrative explicitly tells how Viśvakarmas, having lost their unity, were dispersed over various sub-castes in the world and while coming back logically created a hierarchy of sub-castes. There are three distinct groups of Viśvakarmas who appeared after the fort was destroyed. To the first group belong the descendants of the gatekeeper; the second group comprises the natives, or those who did not escape; the latercomers make the last group which is considered absolutely pure, because they left the fort and did not render themselves to mixed marriages (Brouwer 1995: 222).

The second version of the above legend differs in that the Viśvakarman who had slept with a woman – a prostitute in this version – and revealed the secret about the *haraka* grass, when realized what danger he put the whole fort in, told about that to the elders who commanded to create another fort called Cheena and went to settle there with their families. The rest of the Viśvakarmas living in the fort abandoned it for the forest which was reached by the way of a tunnel once the king surrounded the fort with *haraka* grass and started burning it.

Soon the Viśvakarmas started to merge with the peoples of other kingdoms – they began to follow alien customs and manners, adapted other languages and practices. Once Vyāsa, the same who had practiced deception with a prostitute, persuaded the king to levy a tax on Viśvakarmas and to bring about dissension between them. When Viśvakarmas refused to pay the tax, Vyāsa managed to win over the peasants to his side and declared that all those who supported the king were those of the Right Hand and all the Viśvakarmas were those of the Left Hand. Ultimately, the artisans were imprisoned and their tools confiscated. Some time later the king was defeated by his rival and asked for support

the head of the imprisoned Viśvakarmas, Tvaṣṭācāri, but when the latter refused he was beheaded by the king. The cut off head prayed in surrender at the feet of Kāmākṣammā who instantly got enraged and having taken the form of Kālī and mutilated the king (Brouwer 1995: 223–225).⁴

The break-up of Viśvakarmas into two groups – one that of the Viśvakarma who slept with a woman and his descendants born from a mixed marriage, consequently were considered less pure than those who escaped the fort through the tunnel to the forest, the abode of world-renouncers. The analogy of this social degradation through a mixed marriage is strikingly similar to that found in the 14th century text *Brahmavaivartapurāṇa* which reflects the division of sub-castes of Viśvakarmas as a result of the marriage of the divine artisan Viśvakarma, born as a Brāhmaṇ to an Apsara as a śūdrā woman. Some of the sub-castes from a marriage of similar nomenclature are classified as professional in the Dharmasūtras and the Smṛtis, such as the *Viṣṇudharmasūtra* or the *Vaikhānasasmārtasūtra* (Patkar 1965).

What is central to the story of the Magnetic Fort is its representation of social movements of Viśvakarmas from once a very high status to a relatively low one. In the implicit structure of meanings, as Brouwer thoroughly shows, it also elaborates on fundamental relations between the Viśvakarmas – all originally Brāhmaṇs – called Viśvabrāhmaṇs throughout the southern version of the story, and the ordinary Brāhmaṇs and the king who sowed the conflict between the artisans which, as a consequence, resulted in splitting of Viśvakarma community into different groups (Brouwer 1995: 216ff). Ultimately, the more elaborate southern story also establishes the ritual relationship between the diverse groups of Viśvakarmas and the goddess, which in practice was taken as a sanction of sacrificial functions for the artisans on the par with the Brāhmaṇs.⁵ As it will be seen from further investigation, it is the right to conduct a sacrifice that became the main cause of social contestation between Viśvakarmas and Brāhmaṇs and the core matter of caste debates carried out in colonial South India.

Judicial debates about identity of Viśvakarmas

The conflicts between the right and left hand groups occurred very frequently, and are documented, particularly those in Madras, starting from 1650 (Brimnes 1999; Mukund 2005: 78ff).⁶ These caste disputes were ostensibly about ritual rights, honours, and caste status, the resolution of which eventually was passed on to the legal bodies

⁴ It is interesting to note that there have been attempts to localize the site of the abandoned fort in different places. One of the mentions I came across points to the early city of Mahante in Ceilon (Roberts 1973, 33), but the overall logic of mythologizing the discourse is likely to provide other alternatives also.

⁵ The potter (Vēlār) of Tamil Nadu (Ingليس 1988) or weaver-merchants (Mines 1984) are only two examples of Viśvakarmas taking over priestly duties.

⁶ The study of caste disputes from the early 19th century by Niels Brimnes are of particular relevance to this paper since he reviews a range of court cases found in the so-called *Panchalar Book* kept in the Walter Elliot

of the British Government. However, the claims from the part of the Viśvakarmas for social ranking are known to have been examined as early as the beginning of the 19th century.

In the remaining part of the paper I will discuss the cases of artisans' contestation for their social status through the claims of origins and religious functions which has been variously considered as an infringement of and overlapping with the social and religious functions of the Brāhmaṇs. The cases discussed fall into the period from the 1810s to the 1930s and represent the changes of legal representation of the Viśvakarma community from the individual complaints to the suits brought with the support of the organizations or individual defenders of rights of the artisans. The cases discussed also coincide with the period when the caste disputes which earlier dealt with through special committees, in the first half of the 19th century were relegated to the judicial institutions.

The problem which led to the struggle between Viśvakarmas and Brāhmaṇs arose from the claim of the former for brahmanhood, that is for being the spiritual guides and styling themselves religious teachers (*ācārya*). Viśvakarmas treat themselves as Brāhmaṇs and are initiated with the Brahmanical sacred thread – the belief based on claiming their progenitor to be the god Viśvakarma, the Maker of the Universe. As a result of this lasting struggle there arose between these two fractions many disputes, the settlement of which often demanded the intervention of Courts of Justice which provide the minute records of legal disputes over the right to perform temple rituals. Below two cases from the Madras Presidency will be summarized. These cases, described in length in the book on Viśvakarmas first published in 1909 by Alfred Edward Roberts, Proctor of the Supreme Court of the Island of Ceylon and Member of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, show a long-term judicial practice on the matter.

The earlier case was a civil matter which not only exposed the basic origin of the modern Go-brāhmaṇs, but firmly established the right of the goldsmiths to be regarded as the real original Brāhmaṇs mentioned in the Vedas.⁷

In the year 1818, in the village Chadurperi, in the Chittoor district of Madras Presidency, some goldsmiths (Kammālar) were engaged in solemnizing a marriage. Panchangam Gundayya, a Brāhmaṇ of that town, invaded the premises of the goldsmith where the ceremony was being performed, pulled down the temporary shelter and caused much loss and damage to the family. Margasahaya Acari, a goldsmith, claiming to be a real Brāhmaṇ insisted upon his right to perform the ceremony and to solemnize the marriage. Gundayya, on the other hand, persisted that right vested only in him and other Brāhmaṇs like him.

Collection (Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library, London) which has an over-representation of incidents involving the castes of artisans (Panchalar), see Brimnes 1999: 220–238.

⁷ According to 'Hindu law' which has been applied to Hindus, questions of caste and ceremonial rights were to be determined in the civil courts, yet to avoid defining these rights, indigenous authorities outside the judiciary, such as Pañcayāts, were usually consulted also, for which notably the judiciary of the Madras Presidency was heavily criticized (Brimnes 1999: 224).

The arbitration of a Panchayat, to which the determination of a dispute was referred to, decided the matter in dispute entirely in favour of the goldsmith and held that the Kammālars are real original Brahmins, and that they have the right to perform the ceremony. As a result Gundayya accused the Panchayat of unfair conduct and caused a disturbance at the meeting. Margasahaya Acari prosecuted Gundayya and his followers for assault. Fifteen witnesses proved the charge, of which Gundayya and his adherents were found guilty and fined. One of the averments expressed by the plaintiffs at the suit pertained to the status of Viśvakarmas not particularly within the case but in general. The plaintiffs argued that they are direct descendants of the five Ṛṣis, better known as Manu, Maya, Tvaṣṭar, Śilpi and Viśvajña, the five sons of the god Viśvakarma, born of his five faces Sadyojata, Vamadeva, Aghora, Tatpuruṣa and Iśana, and that accordingly they are pure original Brāhmaṇs (Roberts 1973: 41–47).

The judgement given is instructive in reflecting the practice of recognizing a claim to ceremonial right by proving it had been exercised 'in accordance with inherent and hereditary right, the Hindoo Law – or long usage' (the declaration of the district court of Chingleput as quoted in Brimnes 1999: 232). Brimnes provides the decision passed by the district court of Chittoor, in which the Panchalar were regarded as a branch of the Brāhmaṇs on the base of the references to the Vedas and *śāstras* whereas the defending Brāhmaṇs were able to produce evidence from the later textual sources of the *purāṇas* (Brimnes 1999: 233). To refer to a strikingly similar judgement passed at the above mentioned suit of 1818 on Chadurperi affairs, the decision was brought on the base of assessment of the textual evidences of Vedas adduced by the plaintiffs as opposed to the lack of presented documentary evidence of earlier accounts than the puranic ones to support the argument of the defendants that they are real Brāhmaṇs (sic!). As a result of comparison of antiquity of the texts adduced as the averments the disparaging attitude towards the Viśvakarmas in the epics and the *purāṇas* was treated as supposed 'fabrications of the defendants' ancestors' due to the fact that these texts are 'inferior to the Vedas in importance' (Roberts 1973: 45–47).⁸

The other case was the *Regina vs Śivakoti Virabhadra*, No 18 of 1894, of Assistant Magistrate's Court, Masulipatam, which followed the already established practice to regard the goldsmiths as original Brāhmaṇs.⁹ The offence charged by the indictment was as follows: 'Defiling an object held sacred by a class of persons, intending to insult their religion or knowing it likely that such persons would consider it an insult to their religion – an offence punishable under section 295 of the Indian Penal Code'. The complaint was that the accused, a goldsmith by caste, on the night of the last

⁸ I was unable to trace whether the case described by Brimnes is not identical with that referred to by Roberts merely due to failure of access to *The Panchalar Book* from which Brimnes takes his information. However, regarding striking similarities in argumentation of both judgements, such possibility is more than credible, even though the formulations of the judgements, as found in both sources, slightly differ.

⁹ A longstanding dispute between Komatis and Niyogi Brāhmaṇs from Masulipatam over the right of the former to perform a 'Sastric' ritual is extensively explored in the article by Price (1991) which unfortunately I failed to access while writing this paper.

Mahaśivarātrī, entered the temple of Kasi Viśeśvarasvami in Rustambada, Masulipatam, and performed the ceremony known as *abhiṣeka* by pouring coconut water over the *liṅgam*, that thereby the Brāhmaṇs considered their religion insulted, the *liṅgam* polluted and requiring purification. The case was taken as one which might lead to riots and affrays because in that town the jealousy between the Komaties (*vaiśya*) and the Brāhmaṇs was very keen. It had been even suggested in the process that the accused was instigated by the Komatie, to whom he worked in the godowns, to insult the Brāhmaṇs in this way. The accused admitted that he had performed the ceremony of *abhiṣeka*. The evidence adduced by the prosecution showed conclusively that in the opinion of Brāhmaṇs, the *liṅgam* was defiled by the goldsmith's performance of *abhiṣeka*, purification was thereby rendered necessary and their religion was insulted. The accused, however, argued that he was Viśvabrāhmaṇ by caste and a Kamsala (goldsmith) by occupation and he called several Kammālars who supported him, all stating they had had *brahmanathva* and could perform the same ceremonies as Brāhmaṇs, including *abhiṣeka*. The Assistant Magistrate who executed the prosecution based upon a record of proceedings of a meeting in this very town some years ago, in which the Brahmanical rights of the Viśvabrāhmaṇs were recognized, with the important addition that an influential Brāhmaṇ presided. Finally the accused was acquitted (Roberts 1973: 37–41).

What is crucial in such judicial practice is that it established, to put it in Brimnes' words, a negative sanction by which a particular right was denied to others. By failure of providing a positive sanction to social status, the courts incited legitimation by looking towards antiquity rather than towards the king who used to assume the role in pre-colonial society. This shift in the ways of defining social order, according to Brimnes, contributed to gradual disappearance of disputes between left and right hand caste, since new definition of social order 'was to a much lesser extent open to the competitive renegotiation of status and precedence which formed the basic incentive for the disputes between ... castes' (Brimnes 1999: 234).

An interesting case which discussed the status of Viśvakarma, or Viśvabrāhmaṇa community, came from the Resolution on Matters of General Public Interest moved on 4 August 1931 at the Legislative Council of the Governor of Madras by Brahma Sri Rao Sahib Pandit Ganala Ramamoorthy Garu, himself the Viśvabrāhmaṇa and a member of the Madras Legislative Council.¹⁰ The Resolution under discussion referred to the matter of honorific prefix and suffix to the names of the members of the Viśvabrāhmaṇa community and runs as follows:

¹⁰ All the records are quoted from the extracts of Proceedings from the Official Reports of the Legislative Council of the Governor of Madras appended to *A Memorandum to His Excellency Lord Erskin G.C.I.E., Governor-in-Council, On the Subject of the Representation of the Viswa-brahmana Community in the Local Legislative Council (Upper House) to be Constituted under the Government of India Act, 1935*. Submitted on behalf of the Madras Viswa-karma Labour Union, 1937. I acknowledge my sincere appreciation to K.P. Umaphathy Acharya from Kumbakonam (Tamil Nadu) who kindly shared this material with me.

‘This Council recommends the Government that the names of the communities now called Kamsalins, Kammalans, and Thattans [i.e. all three being different castes of goldsmiths], be hereafter entered in Government records as Viśva Brāhmaṇs with the honorific prefix of “Brahma Sri” and suffix of “Acharyulu Garu” or “Achariyar Avargal” to the Telugu and Tamil members respectively, and that their additional caste title “Pandit Maharaj” be prefixed to Silpis, Sthapatis and other gentlemen of the community who express a desire that their names may be associated with the above honorific plural.’ (Proceedings from the non-official business report, 4 August 1931).

It was not the first time this issue was raised. Previously a similar motion for discussion was tabled on the very floor on 14 October 1921. As a result the title ‘Achari’, as a Sanskrit derivation, was introduced into Government records, yet in the tamilised form ‘Asari’ for which the Viśvabrāhmaṇa communities complained as being an ironical expression in Tamil signifying ‘the broom stick’.

Next year, the motion at the Legislative Council of Madras on 1 November 1932 was successful and the resolution was passed. As a consequence the Government Order No 315, Law (General), was issued on 27 January 1933, which enacted to the recommendation of the Legislative Council to recommend to Government to use the honorific suffices and prefixes to the names of the members of Viśvakarma communities in Government records.

Conclusions

The overall historical exposition and above mentioned colonial examples represent the long-term contestation regarding the Viśvakarma community status. The instances of dissention between them and the Brāhmaṇs were numerous as well as the examples of acknowledgment of Brahmanical status for Viśvakarmas on the part of Brāhmaṇs themselves. What rises no doubt, however, when we look at the history of this social contestation and caste uprising, are constant attempts to legitimize changes in social and ritual position of artists and artisans in Indian society.

To sum up the relations between Viśvakarmas and Brāhmaṇs over colonial period, it is obvious that colonial judiciary succeeded in bringing considerable changes into traditionally negotiable status of Viśvakarma castes. Largely it was attained due to judicial practices of dealing with caste status that fundamentally substituted the legitimizing authority of the king and diminished the role of deep-rooted context sensitive relations in society. On the other hand the judicial judgements about status of artisans through application of legitimizing power of traditional texts, the Vedas and *śāstras*, substantially contributed to a new strategy of the artisans’ identity formation which focused on legitimizing textual constructions rather than mere arguing about uniqueness of their professional practices

and skills as had been customary in the pre-colonial society. Hence further investigation in contemporary legitimizing practices of textualization related to artists' and artisans' status is really a desideratum; arguments of contemporary traditional artists about the Vāstu Veda, known as the *Sthāpatya-*, *Praṇava-*veda, which found the discussion about origins and historically diminished status of the traditional artists are worth analyzing with the aim to at least critically evaluate recent revisionist trends within the Indian art historiography.

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