



Small Cultures: Baidnlas As Neglected Priests In Dalit Community

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ABSTRACT : Most of the Dalits are not aware that there are several sub-castes and dependent castes within their community until Madiga Dandora Movement brought this fact into lime-light. Literature is being produced from the point of view of one or two castes of the Dalit community. Like any other state, Telugu states too have about 62 sub-castes within the Dalit community. Dalit intellectuals focus only on the principal castes which are already in lime light. But literature of the so called out-castes within the outcaste is ignored. These invisible castes have been looked down upon by the people of their own community. This would amount to caste discrimination within caste or community. The neglected communities need critical attention in their representation. Malas and Madigas are patron castes while Adhi-andhra, Bagara, Mala Dasari, Malamasti, Baidnlas, Dakkalis, Chindus, BudagaJangam etc., are known as dependent castes which are virtually deprived of human dignity, equality and respect in civil society today. Research has also not much been carried out on these dependent castes. Of the above Dalit sub-castes, my paper particularly examines socio-cultural scenario of the Baidnlas, the priestly caste in Telangana state.

KEY WORDS: Mala Madigas, Dalit Community, Human Dignity, Equality and Respect, Caste Discrimination.

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I. CASTE IN INDIAN SOCIETY

It is appropriate to briefly reflect on caste as an institution which created sub-castes and dependent castes in Indian society. Caste in our country is a pervasive phenomenon that affected attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of the members of the Hindu religion. The caste phenomenon lead the Indians into different social and cultural groups to end up in social disintegration. There was a misconception about caste as being divine origin or scriptural origin and its central role was attributed to Manu, the Hindu law giver. Dismissing the theory of the religious and textual origin of caste, quoting Baba Saheb Ambedkar, Kannabiran says, “caste existed long before Manu whose role was limited to codifying existing rules and preaching them” (36). Non-Hindu religions too imitated the Hindu socio-cultural practice. Conversions to non-Hindu religions failed to curb the caste discrimination and religious prejudice. Dr.B.R.Ambedkar’s decision to embrace Buddhism is a strong case in point. This cancerous caste disease, no doubt to say, spread across all religious domains even though Islam and Christianity are said to be caste-free religions.

In Indian society, every caste has its sub-caste or a dependent caste in caste hierarchy. Our country has more than four thousand castes and sub-castes to its credit and there are about more than sixty sub-castes within the Dalit community in the Telugu states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Apart from sub-castes, there are dependent and patron castes too among the Scheduled Castes. Dependent castes like Baidnlas, Chindus and Dakkalis being artistes figure prominently on the schedule but constitutional benefits are not reaching out to them. It is because the dominant Scheduled Castes alone grab the benefits. Basically this paper focuses on Baidnlas who belong to the priestly class in name but they are deprived of every benefit as their patron castes are always on the forefront to grab them. As a routine, they involve in conducting marriage ceremonies and celebrations of the local deities in the village. They eke out their livelihood on their ancestral occupation but most of them do labour in fields.

Baidnlas act as priests for Madigas, the patron caste. While practicing priesthood in various ceremonies, Baidnlas use instruments in the narration of stories related to Yellamma, the local goddess worshiped by Madigas and other marginalized castes in villages. Baidnlas are endowed with creative instincts. They have their own style of narration and use instruments called Jamidikas. The artistic profession of the

dependent castes indicates their socio-cultural background. They always revolve around the patron castes for social and cultural reasons. The artistic performance of the dependent castes eulogize the birth of local goddesses, traditions and customs related to the patron community.

The dependent caste phenomenon exists not just among Schedules Castes but also among upper castes. To exemplify this, Pichakuntlas are referred to as the dependent castes for Reddys and Kapus, RunjasandPanasasforVishvabrahmins, Sadhanashurasand Kunapusalis are for Padmashalis, Mandcchulu and OggusforGollas, Gouda JettusandYenutisfor Goundlas, Gankuntosfor ChakaliswhileFakkirolulforKummaris. In the same way, Baidnlas organize priesthood for Madigas alone.

Baidnla Nomenclature

TheBaidnlas are called in different names with the regional dialectical variations within the state. They are also known as Bavanis. In SriramaRaju's words, "the name 'Bavanis' was accrued through the instruments they played on. They use Jamidikas as the musical instruments. Scholars call the instruments Bavanikas. Those who play on Bavanikas are known as Bavanis or Baidnlas. Bavanika is also known as 'Pamba' (56). Baidnlas are also addressed as Bavanilas because they use Bavanikas while narrating the stories about their caste-deity. According to Arudra, the Telugu poet and cine songs writer, 'these Bavanis are known as Pambalas by virtue of their instrument called 'Pamba'.

Of course, dictionaries have several meanings for 'Bavaneelu.' Baidnlas are also called 'Bainity' and Asaads particularly in Rayalaseema of Andhra Pradesh. In Andhra, they are called Kommuvaaru while in Telangana, they are known as Bavaneelavaru, Pambalavaru and Jamukulavaaru. Baidnlas have acquired their nomenclature through musical instruments they play on. The Jamidikas symbolize the Baidnla culture. It is unimaginable without the instrument. The cultural symbols serve as the Baidnla identity.

Jamidika As Cultural Icon

Jamidika as a cultural icon is conical in its shape. It is open at one end and the other end is covered with the tender skin of a calf. Its body is made of wood or bronze. At the bottom, a string is tied to a short wooden roller with a bunch of small bells at the end. Musical players strum the string to produce musical notes in tune with the songs. The Baidnla 'Jamidika' has its myth. ThangiralaVenkataSubba Rao is of the view that while playing spinning top, Parushurama was mocked at by his friends as he was fatherless. He questioned his mother about his father. She escaped from answering her son's question and went tohide herself in a trough in the Madiga Street. "Parushurama came in the guise of Pambala playing Jamidika and prayed to his mother. She came out of the trough immediately (57). It is construed that Jamidika is endowed with some power through its musical tone, which summoned Parashurama's mother from the trough. Baidnlas have a strong conviction about their musical instrument and its cultural association.

Jamidikas are almost made in similar shapes in all places of the state. But, the number of the participating Baidnla artistes varies from one area to another. For example, in Mahabubnagar district in Telangana, only two Baidnla artistes involve in the act of narration which is slightly different from the Baidnlas of other districts. A single person, as the principal narrator, uses the big Jamidika while the second one handles the smaller one. Both the Jamidikas produce different notes to create musical harmony. The second person plays the chorus. Narrative performance differs a little in other districts like Nalgonda, and Kammam involving more than two persons. The principal performer plays on the Jamidika while the others handle a small hand-harmonium, one or two pairs of cymbals accompanied by a small drum. This differentiates the narrating mode, but they maintain the spirit of the stories concerning the village deities, which epitomizes the Baidnla culture. In fact, literacy rate is moderate among Baidnlas. The Baidnla Children are encouraged to go along with their parents while moving from one place to the other during training in their occupation. It is because, they have a fear that their children would forget the traditional occupation if they continue to study further education. The elders play music while narrating the stories. The Baidnla children practise handling of musical instruments like Jamidika, cymbals and harmonium. They try to ape the narrative performance which appropriating the rituals and ceremonies like marriages particularly in the Madiga families. Right from their childhood, they are trained in the caste-tradition. But the young generation tends to prefer the modern profession to the traditional one.

Ceremonial Mediations

Social customs differ from one society to the other within the Hindu fold. One cannot distinguish Madigas from Baidnlas though they have patron-client relations. As per the relation, Baidnlas act as priests for Madigas. Baidnlas have earned a special recognition through their priesthood. Given their ecclesiastical significance, they conduct marriage ceremonies for Madigas. Though they play a priestly role in their ceremonial negotiations, they still remain dependent castes in social relations. As priests, they mediate with the village deities during village processions. They recite musical narratives in praise of the village deities like

Yellamma, Maisamma, Pochamma etc. They believe that if there is any mediational lapse, the deities become enraged and inflict the entire village with incurable diseases like plague and cholera.

Often they sing the Yellamma Katha or the story eulogizing the birth of Yellamma goddess. They narrate the story in tune with the Jamidika. Both the Jamidikas produce different musical notes from each other. The instruments are used simultaneously for music. One of them acts as a main narrator and the other person repeats the sequence of the narration.

The Baidndlas not only perform marriages of their patrons but also observe the similar ceremonial procedures in the marriages of their own. Baidndlas are not particular about formal exchanges like dowry during marriages. The Baidndla families do not prioritize socio-economic status of the other party while mediating marital alliance. They see that the marital alliances are determined within the orbit of their tradition not on what is prominently exchanged between the parties. No dowry tradition exists among Baidndlas.

Child Birth

During the birth of a child, they initiate and observe the traditional norms. They christen the baby on the 21st day and celebrate the occasion accordingly. Such ceremonies are conducted within their culture and tradition. In Varna hierarchy, Brahmins are priests for upper castes while Baidndlas conduct rituals for Madigas. Though Baidndlas are priests for Madigas, they maintain the client position in social relation. Through their artistic performance during marriages and other ceremonies/festivals, they command priestly respect from their patrons.

In social hierarchy, Madigas consider Baidndlas as inferior. The rich Dalits living in cosmopolitan environment, engage Brahmin pundits not Baidndlas for pujas, marriage ceremonies and other rituals. The urban Brahmin pundits would not mind performing pujas for Dalits for handsome payment of remuneration for their priesthood. Baidndlas are still sporadically seen performing the marriages of their patrons in villages. Inter-dining exists between Madigas and Baidndlas during marriage celebrations.

Sapinda Rule

Given the fundamental principle, caste is associated with endogamy and heredity. The nature of endogamy is narrow and its scope is limited. For example, a man must marry a woman of his own caste. Endogamy prescribes stringent principle in marital contexts and obligates the norms, and also regulates marriage system within the tradition. People of that particular social group cannot violate the sapindarule. Baidndlas do not prefer the marriages outside their caste. They do not take alliances from their patron caste. In the broader sense, Indian society is characterized by an elaborate custom of exogamy. This rule prohibits marriage between Sapindas (blood kin) and Sagotras (of the same class) as well. Endogamy promotes caste rigidity and creates environment for caste severity in its practice. Baidndlas can be identified with endogamous group.

Bigamy among Baidndlas

Though bigamy is legally unacceptable, the practice of bigamy appears among the dependent castes. This affair takes place with the consent of elders of the Baidndla community. The Baidndla men prefer bigamy for the occupational reason that they tend to take a trip on musical narrative performance in different villages. During their tour, they need wives to help them in performance and the second wife would stay at hometo take care of children and the livestock. Young widows too accept themselves but their marital relations are endogamous. Inter-caste marriages hardly take place among them. If any member of their caste prefers inter-varna, he/she will be excommunicated from the community. This appears to be a strict norm in their community. Thus they strictly follow the endogamous rule. However, in changing society the educated youth enjoys freedom in choosing their partners for marriage in spite of the norms prescribed by their community.

Patron-Client Relation

For Madigas, the male narrators of the family members conduct marriage ceremonies and other rituals. Besides narrative performances, they often tend to do labour in agricultural fields like any other laborer. As story narrators, they have not got used to labour work. In the absence of the celebrations of their patron community, they have to find out an alternative earning for their survival. They do not perform priesthood for non-Dalit families. There are no marital relations between the Baidndlas and their patron community. During celebrations, Baidndlas openly dine with Madigas while Madigas do not share the same with Baidndlas due to sub-caste difference or patron-client relation.

The Baidndla community explores an alternative employable source as their ancestral occupation is almost devalued for want of patronage of Madigas and the government as well. In several villages, Baidndlas have lost their priestly hold as the elite Madigas prefer the upward mobility in all spheres of socio-cultural life. The rich Dalits in urban areas engage Brahmins to conduct worship for house-warming ceremonies, other rituals like Vratas and Yagnas. They tend to run after sanskritization of their rituals and family celebrations in a bid to

emulate the upper castes. Thus they prefer the Brahmin priests to Baidnlas to perform modernized forms of worship.

The Baidnla population appears to have been reduced to a small number due to their conversion to Christianity. The population of the original Baidnlas is dismal. The second and third generation youth hardly prefers the hereditary occupation and they are left with no other option but to do labour along with the people of other communities. It is because they hardly receive patronage of their patron communities for their artistic narration. With encouragement by the elders of their community, some young people from the same family evince interest in the performance. Conversion appears to them as a channel to enter the modern world. This has become an escape route from the Hindu caste complex and social humiliation. The Baidnla youth have gradually developed aversion towards ancestral practices. They tend to reject superstitious beliefs straight away. They prefer other professions to their ancestral occupation.

The Baidnla occupation and its traditional sheen remain on the verge of extinction due to lack of proper patronage. The new generation begins to explore fresh avenues to replace the hereditary occupation for their livelihood. The Baidnla occupation has become a sparsely practised performance which hardly fetch adequate income to fulfill their daily needs. They invariably depend upon labour for their life-sustenance. At some places, aged Baidnlas are still interested in the hereditary occupation, but their physical debility defeat their desire for occupational promotion.

II. CONCLUSION

The Baidnla tradition, being on the verge of extinction, is discernable in the village environment even today. Baidnlas narrate the stories pertaining to the goddess Yellamma on the occasions of local celebrations. In the absence of such celebrations, Baidnlas involve in labour works too. But the aged Baidnlas in their love for story-narrations and also because of physical debility, they hardly involve in physical labour. Some Baidnlas have got government jobs too. Very rarely, the Baidnla person like KadiumSrihari has become the Deputy Chief Minister of Tengana State. It is not that all Baidnlas are sound. The youth with less significance and encouragement to their occupation which is not lucrative for their living, prefer modern professions in order to be associated with the mainstream life. The wealthy educated Madigas engage Brahmin priests rather than Baidnlas to conduct ceremonies unlike the rural Madigas. In the act of upward mobility of the rich Madigas in village and urban life, Baidnlas are a neglected lot. The priesthood almost disappears and ancestral occupation jeopardizes their survival.

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