
Text as Culture and Culture as Text: An Anthropological Analysis of Dalit's Narratives in the Context of Village Ritual

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Abstract

Though plethora of publications on the south Indian village rituals is available, the documentation of the folk narratives – stories and songs - which constitute essential component in their organization has been little. The participation of a sub-caste of Dalits called Asadi, bards who jealously preserve and render these narratives, is mandatory not only for this reason but also will the deities be greatly annoyed of their non-participation. Thus, without the Dalit village ritual cannot be organized at all. Organizing the village ritual is a collective enterprise of the village community; however, while the upper dominant caste takes leading role, other upper castes and some lower castes contribute and participate some castes such as Dalit, Potter, Washerman, and Barber etc., have mandatory roles. In this background, the paper presents an analysis of the Dalit's narratives – stories, recorded in Andhra area.

These stories are oral texts, variable from individual to individual, however, holding together certain core elements that disseminate traditional cultural values, world views, perceptions and ideas. Since these are cultural products the formal analysis would focus on the techniques of production that have cultural base. As the text is a constituent of culture and that it reflects the social and cultural milieu, the analysis engages in interpretation for exploring the cultural codes and their signification. For the purpose of such analyses, eclectic approach is adopted drawing strength from different theoretical perspectives such as structuralism, post-structuralism, and post-modernism, cultural, communication and the contemporary anthropological conceptualization of culture itself.

The paper attempts unraveling the discursively operating power in the extant social relations constituted largely on the basis of caste and gender hierarchies, and resistance to such power laden relations from the lower castes, Dalits and women. There is an ingenious art of subtle resistance in sacred "liminality". It also shows underlying a patent alternative to the hegemonic view of hierarchical caste and gender in south Indian society and culture. The argument proposed here contradicts the view of meek submission of the subordinates in Indian society; rather, the sub-ordinates tolerated the undue power/domination given the local situation and politico-economic conditions in the past and continue to do so even now to a certain degree.

The organization of village rituals¹ is an important feature of Indian society and its culture, that has attracted first the attention Christian Missionaries during the colonial period, and later on several social anthropologists. The documentation of them in South India started from the turn of 20th Century; “Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism: A Study of the Local and Village Deities of Southern India” (Elmore 1915) and “The Village Gods of South India” (Whitehead 1921) are the important ones. Then there has been a stream of anthropological works, to mention a few, Reddy (1952), Srinivas (1952), Dube (1955), Harper (1959, 1964), Beals (1964), Dumont (1986), Dirks (1987), Hiebert (1971), Jacob Pandian (1983), Moffatt (1979), Tapper (1979), Pfeffenberger (1980), Fuller (1987, 1992), Nuckolls (1997), Rao (1998) and recently Mines (2002). However, except Moffatt almost none has attempted to examine the significance of narratives connected to the organization of these rituals.

The present paper focuses on the village rituals performed in Andhra area wherein the participation of a sub-caste of Mala, one of the Scheduled Castes who like to call themselves Dalits, called Asadi, bards. The participation of Asadi requires them to render the stories of the deities and sing songs in praise of the deities; they jealously preserve the lore. Though one of the upper dominant castes takes the leading role, other upper castes and some lower castes such as Potter, Washerman, and Barber etc., contribute and participate, the participation of Asadi is so important that not only for the reason that they preserve the stories of the deities but also the deities will be greatly annoyed of their non-participation. For the non-Dalit castes particularly the upper castes are not offered to incur the displeasure and wrath of the goddess, ritual cannot be organized at all without the Dalit Asadi.

Anthropological understanding of Indian society through village rituals from different theoretical perspectives so far has over looked the oral narratives significant. It largely focused so far as on the structural properties of the ritual. The concern has been in fact to find out the association between the system of values contained in the ritual practices and social behavior that gives coherence to the social system. From these writings one can realize that the village rituals reproduce the social order² wherein all the castes take up their roles related to their traditional occupations. For the actors, they participate in propitiating the deities for the benevolence of sending rains, regenerate life – plant, animal and human, and protect animals and humans from various epidemics and diseases. Through ritual they reiterate their dependency of humans on the powerful gods and goddesses. In this regards what do the Asadi’s oral narratives signify and what do people read through these narratives is explored in the present paper.

¹The village ritual is a collective ritual organized in honour of a female deity specific to that village where entire village community participates. The village rituals are to be noted against private rituals such as life cycle rituals where participation is restricted to those concerned, rituals performed by individuals, and community rituals which are not specific to particular village but are organized as part of a festival observance with reference to the deities everywhere on the fixed dates.

²Leach writes, "...ritual action and belief are alike to be understood as forms of symbolic statements about the social order" (Leach 1964: 14). "The structure which is symbolised in ritual is the system of socially approved 'proper' relations between individuals and groups" (Leach 1964: 15).

As an oral text the narrative is a construct, produced by an anonymous author whose identity can never be found. The truth value that it purports to have provided to the participants of the ritual is a construct is being read in the ritual and interpreted accordingly. Here we also find the preservation of the culture of the people and communication of its. It demonstrates the kills of the author and those who render it, and in the process the text creates and recreates the cultural values and ethos and reinforces them on the people. Besides it, they also assert their place in the history and also in the society. In this context we recognize Milton Singer's insight with reference to Indian Great Tradition identifying the role played by various performances in the dissemination of culture, but very little is known in this regard about the performative role in the Little Tradition that perpetuates the popular culture of the rural masses.

The theoretical premise on which the analysis of the oral texts is based comes from Clifford Geertz's metaphor 'culture as text'. In Geertz's enterprise of studying other culture is "anthropologist's reading other people's text over their shoulders." (1973:452). For him culture is 'ensemble of texts'. He says in this context one needs to borrow concepts and procedures which could be symbol, meaning, metaphor, plot, story, motif, interpretation from the literary studies. It involves in 'perceiving of other people's perceiving', 'reading of other people's readings' and 'texting of other people's texting' (Geertz 2003:30). Geertz's idea of 'culture as text' is not free from problems when applied to Indian material as in case of others (see Hoffman 2009). Indian society has had literate culture; several texts were produced though mainly in Sanskrit in several vernacular languages, besides huge repertoire of oral texts. The anthropologists long ago realized the problem of the texts and contexts to understanding the Indian society through texts (Singer, Srinivas). Srinivas set the feet firmly on the ground concentrating on the context where culture is approached in interaction with the people in ethnographic fieldwork context. Hence, Geertz's idea of culture as text can be applied in a limited way.

'Culture as text' is a 'traveling concept' that has traveled beyond boundaries of ethnography, but had taken from 'anthropological turn' to 'cultural turn' and as such it traveled to cultural studies and literary studies (Bachmann-Medick). In its 'cultural turn' anthropologists began to critical revisit of the very concept culture, considering it from overemphasis on mental process to symbolic dimension. In literary studies the perspective, text as culture, has entered into the field engaging in interpretation of dominant symbolic repertoire or systems of signs. Culture is to be seen not only as product but also as 'production'- the process of its creation. The texts should also be read as "cultural performances" to represent and to constitute the reality; it is a shift from text to performance – performative turn, and to go beyond words, (Bachmann-Medick). As a literary text it allows linguistic analysis as well in the given cultural background. Language being an ideological sign system, not purely semiological it is inseparable in social praxis and class struggle.

I further like to take it from Saussure's semiology of language being constituted from signifiers and signified, and from Levi-Strauss's binaries as constituents of culture to Bakhtin's speech communication (Brank Mraovic) – utterance to be metalinguistic phenomenon. In the later, reader becomes an active participant in the construction of the meaning of the script. In language there is 'life of words', language is intrinsically social creation, speech is a social act. Speech is the process in which there is actualization of internal speech manifested in social

context in the conscious effort. It is dyadic and dialogical, and without the other, speech is ineffective and meanings are created in an openended dialogical discourse. For Bakhtin, novels are monologic and also dialogic in the latter multiple voices obtain space, it is unfinished and continued discourse. In the subject-object discourse, Bakhtin emphasizes the subject, selfhood actualized in the presence of the other, subjectivity critically important in dialogue.

From the above perspectives an attempt has been made to analyze the oral narratives as 'text as culture' and 'culture as text'. The entire ritual is a meta-linguistic sign vehicle signifying the interaction of the humans in terms of caste and gender in socio-economic, political and religion contexts. The reading is done at referential as well as semantic levels, as a speech event in performative and communication context.

The narration of stories is a performance put up by the Asadi with his stringed instrument with an assistance sometimes acting as an interlocutor invoking the deity by singing of praise of the deity. The performance takes place between 10.00 or 11.00 pm to 5.00 or 6.00 am on the next day for about one or two hours.

1. Story of Malas

There was an untouchable by the name of Sareendla Malaiah who had seven wives and seven sons. The goddess Poleramma set out to curse and cause misfortunes to Gone Katam Reddy. She got ready her bullock cart to go to the village of Gone Katam Reddy called Rachoripatnam. Then Pothuraju, brother of Poleramma said, "Sister, what do you think of your bullock cart? It is not an ordinary cart! It needs all kinds of sacrifices including human sacrifice." Then-Poleramma replied that she could get everything it needed. Pothuraju objected to her, asking who would come forward to be offered as a sacrifice. Poleramma said, "No, no, one Sareendla Malaiah in the town of Panagallu located in Pakanati rashatram (state), who is ruling Amravathi village has seven wives and seven sons. He is staunch and ardent devotee that if I ask him for one wife he would not say no." So, Poleramma asked Sareendla Malaiah to give a wife as a sacrifice to her bullock cart. He asked his seven wives whether anyone of them would like to be sacrificed. Six of them ran for their lives in different directions with their children who became the six sub-castes of the Malas, The youngest wife, Polemma, and her son came forward and were sacrificed finally. Now the six sisters of Poleramma and their brother were going on the bullock cart driven by Poleramma as Sareendla Malaiah was going in front of the cart. Poleramma thought that Malaiah might ask for his wife and child at any time for gods could never trust humans. She carried the bodies of these two persons as *gujjulu* (posts) for the cart and fixed the heads to the axis on either side. They travelled for one hundred and fifty *amadas* [may be assumed as miles]. When they got near the village of Rachoripatnam, Malaiah said, "Mother! where is my wife Polemma?" Poleramma called her, "Where are you Sareendla Ganga?" Immediately the woman came to life. Then Malaiah asked-her what she was going to give him for his service, to which she replied that she would take care of him. Whenever he would call her, Poleramma would appear before him and help him. She would be on his back, that is, within reach all the time. But he was not supposed to eat food from the house where a death occurred, a

girl had her first menstruation or a woman who was in her periods. Then Poleramma raised to life his son who became an Asadi. The boy asked her Why he was brought to life again. Poleramma replied that she was going to be born in every village in *kaliyuga*, and villagers conduct *Jatharas*. In every *jathara* he was supposed to sing songs for three days called *melikolupulu* in order to-keep her awake. Then the Asadi boy said, "Mother, people will feed you with something or other, but what will they give me?" She 'said that he would be given plenty of toddy, liquor and shares in 'everything.

2. Story of Gone Katam Reddy

There lived a Reddy called Gone Katam Reddy who belonged to a sub-caste, the Motati kapu in *thretha yuga*. In this family was born Adi Shakthi [the implication is that she is a daughter]. She told Katam Reddy that she would bless him abundantly with all the riches in the world if he worshipped her. Initially he agreed to do so. She gave him jewels, pearls; gold, silver, numerous cattle, sixty four pairs of bullocks, and everything else. She herself built a strong fort with a width of 23 feet, and a height of 23 feet with only seven stones just over night. Katam Reddy's son Raghava Reddy and daughter-in-law Rajamma and grandson became ardent devotees of Adi Shakthi, whereas he himself refused to worship her. He became very proud of his riches and said that he would not worship a female; instead he became a devotee of Shiva. Rajamma advised her father-in-law to worship Adi Shakthi, who blessed him so much, and it was ungrateful on his part not to worship, but Katam Reddy did not care for this advice. She told him one day that she had a dream in which herself, her husband and their son went to heaven in mortal bodies, a great boon, whereas Katam Reddy and others were going to hell. For this Katam Reddy, felt very sorry and wondered how this could happen? Meanwhile his son-in-law, Vema Reddy, happened to come there and found his father-in-law very sad. He asked him why he was sad, at which Katam Reddy told him that Rajamma and her family were going to heaven with mortal bodies and rest of them were going to hell. At this, Vema Reddy replied that what Rajamma said was false. Then Katam Reddy called on Rajamma and beat her with his hand for telling lies. In response to this Rajamma did not get angry but expressed her sympathy that perhaps her father-in-law's palms got hurt. She further said that he could call on the Veda Brahmins and find out if what she said was true, or false. Katam Reddy called Veda Brahmins and asked whether it was true, and the latter affirmed and supported Rajamma. Then Rajamma told Katam Reddy that Adi Shakthi and her agents were going to destroy all his property, and misfortune was to be fall on him shortly. Even then Katam Reddy refused to worship Adi Shakthi. Soon everything began to die, one by one, and there were no rains. Disease struck the village, and people began to die of smallpox and other diseases. The entire village was filled with sobs and cries, yet Katam Reddy did not worship Adi Shakthi Except for the family of Katam Reddy, only a mother and her young son remained In the village. Vultures and birds were hovering and feeding on the deceased cattle and corpses. Katam Reddy's other sons and son-in-law took all the corpses on the bullock cart and dumped them outside the village. The village was stinking with smell and became uninhabitable. A surviving mother told

her son, giving a handful of jewels, to leave the village and live elsewhere, lest he would also die. So the boy started his journey on a bullock cart, but no sooner did he come to the gate of the village than an old woman, disguised Adi Shakthi, appeared, and the boy was terribly afraid and stood motionless. The old woman asked him where he was going and begged to take her to the next village. The boy replied that everybody had died in the village, and his mother advised him to leave the village and live elsewhere. He pitied on the old woman and asked her to sit on the bullock cart. As they were going, the old woman asked the boy to do her a favour. She said that the greatest merits were to remove thorns from the feet, to give water to thirsty people and to delouse a person suffering from lice. She requested him to delouse her for which he would get heavenly merits. The old woman looked very ugly but the boy pitied her. He stopped the cart and started to delouse her. When he touched her hair and parted it he was shocked with the sparks of one thousand eyes on her scalp. The old woman asked him what happened *and* why was he shocked. The boy gave a reply, "Grandmother, you look so ugly, but I see your scalp full of eyes and the sparks of them shocked me." Then the old woman revealed to him that she was Adi Shakthi and was punishing Gone Katam Reddy for being ungrateful to her. The boy was very lucky because he escaped death as he was kind to her; she in fact followed to test and kill him because she did not like anyone escaping death in that village. He had escaped death, but his mother would die.

The situation in the village became very acute so that even the water in the wells was polluted. Katam Reddy was now suffering from diarrhea, and no medicine worked. He asked his son-in-law to bring fresh water from the well. He went to the well and found that the water contained puss and blood. Then Rajamma went to the well, and when she drew water, it was as good as coconut water. Then Katam Reddy requested his son-in-law to find any female soothsayer to reveal to him the reasons for the misfortunes in the village and for his ill-health. Vema Reddy replied that there was no one in the village because almost all had died, and anyhow, he would search for his father-in-law's satisfaction. So he went on the mission but did not find any soothsayer. As he was returning home, he found an old soothsaying woman, disguised Adi Shakthi, near the well. He was surprised to find her just near their house for he searched all over the village, but nobody was found. He called the woman in a very derogatory term to come to his house, but she refused saying that, unless he humbled himself and asked her with appropriate reverence, she would not go. Vema Reddy got angry and said, "*Erikala lanjaku intha pogara!*" (Oh, this soothsayer prostitute is so proud). He went home, but Katam Reddy insisted that she should be brought home. So Vema Reddy went back and requested her politely to come to Katam Reddy's home, but she said that she would go only if she was sent a palanquin and offered her *siri chapa* [a mat made of reeds used for sitting on the floor], an honour for high caste people. He went back home and told Katam Reddy, who ordered the palanquin to be sent to the soothsayer. After coming to his home she was offered *siri chapa*, but Katam Reddy said very arrogantly and indecently, "*Emi Erikala munda pilesthe antha pogara? Nitho avasaram vachinidi legadde cheppu!*" (What-Erikala widow, you are so proud. Now we have got work with you.. What to do? Tell me future or give a forecast or reasons for the misfortunes). For this the soothsayer said that unless he properly talked to her she was not going to say anything. Katam Reddy

had nothing to say but accepted all her demands. Then she took his palm to examine his hand. The moment she touched him, he felt shock and his eyes were opened and began to tremble. She asked him if he was prepared to taste her blow and die instantly. At this, Katam Reddy instantly fell on her feet, accepted his wrongs, and sought forgiveness. Then, Adi Shakthi revealed her real features and ordered him to worship her and receive her blessing. As long as he worshipped her he would not lack anything.

3. Story of Eendra Caste

There was an Eendra caste family of three brothers and a sister. They all got married. The three brothers owned quite a few toddy trees, and tapping a lot of toddy. They earned sufficient money by selling toddy. The sister's family was poor because her husband had few toddy trees. All the three brothers and the sister were very mean, miserly and greedy also. The sister, was, above all, quarrelsome and did not respect her husband. The goddess Poleramma desired to test these Eendra families. So, one day she disguised herself as an old woman and came to the toddy trees of the eldest brother. She told him that she was suffering from a terrible disease, and she was advised to drink some toddy. If he could give her some toddy, she would taste and see, and if it were good she would drink a mouthful; otherwise, she would spit it out. But the brother was very angry, and unkind and shouted at her to leave immediately. Likewise she approached second brother who, too, was very unkind. When she approached the third brother, he was cruel and even kicked her to the point of death and threw her in a bush.

Because the sister was also cruel like her brothers, her husband used to fear her very much. But he was a very kind person unlike his brothers-in-law. One day he borrowed the ring and the pot from one of his brothers-in-law to collect toddy because he was poor and did not own them. Poleramma came to him as before and begged for some toddy. This man, pitied her and poured toddy in her hands. When she drank a pot full of toddy, he poured another pot-full and likewise a third one. But the moment he realized that he poured all toddy to the old woman he remembered his wife and felt very sad. He was scared that she was going to abuse him. He told the old woman, crying that his wife would not believe him that he helped a poor woman. Instead she would allege that he had sold away the toddy and had given money to another woman for sexual favours. But the old woman consoled him saying not to worry and asking him look into the pots. To his astonishment, he found the pots filled with gold coins. When he tried to look at the woman she had already disappeared. He went back home and told his wife what had happened. The woman exclaimed that she must be the goddess Poleramma. They immediately prepared *bonalu* and worshipped with an offering of a goat. She never ill-treated her husband again. This family became very rich, whereas his brothers-in-law became very poor by losing all the wealth they had.

The Narratives as Miniaturized Culture

As Geertz observes cultural art is miniaturized culture, the cock flight in Javanese society is not to be viewed in isolation, the oral narratives of the Asadi constitute a component of the ritual and the ritual is part and parcel of the village life. The functionalist anthropologists have viewed the village ritual having integrating function of diverse castes, taking different roles closely associated with caste occupations. Caste hierarchy and across the caste gendered language, social behavior and division of labour order the social life. The low castes and women experience subordination, subjection, inferiority at the hands of upper castes and men. They are social excluded categories in some respects and included some other. The social hierarchy encompasses economic disparities; the upper castes are rich while the lower castes are poor. There is ample historical evidence of existence of slavery and the untouchables by rule were not to hold property.³ Men only inherit property, and women have no right over the parental property. The patriarchy orders the gender roles in the house and outside across the castes.

The village ritual as stated above is a collective affair primarily honouring female deities so as to harness their blessing for wellbeing of all. In this the role of the Asadi is to render the stories of the deities. The Asadi engages himself telling the story of his own caste and stories of other castes in relation with the deities. There is an emotional involvement of the Asadi with the deities; it is though a paid service but it 'use value', the kind of relationship between the deity and Asadi who represents Dalit that is reenacted and reiterated, over rules the 'exchange value'. Therefore, the narratives required to be analyzed in the social and cultural background of the village community.

The narratives are myths that 'think through men' as Levi-Strauss emphasized. The thinking of myths is through the Asadi who make utterances and engages in dialogic narrations. In this dialogic process what happens is as Callway pointed

"a dialogical methodology which rejects the division between subject and object, places the self within the field of investigation, evaluates positionality and power relations, and creates an intersubjective matrix for knowledge" (Callaway 1992:44) from Bowie, Fiona *Anthropology of Religion*

The texts of the Asadi are also to be seen as one kind along with other texts, as culture being ensemble of texts (Geertz 1973:). Villagers are aware of several Sanskritic, Great Traditional, stories and mythologies wherein particularly the powers of goddesses such as Durga or Parvathy, Sita, and several others. Therefore one text gets influenced by other texts, and in this context the Asadi stories are intertextual in content. Beneath a particular text, there can be other underlying text serving as a base on which the story is knit with certain culturally acceptable and relevant aesthetic elements.

Muted Voices

The narratives represent the 'muted voices' of the Dalit as well as women who are in the same relation with the dominants - non-Dalit castes and males, as oppressed ones. Edwin Ardener's

³ Dharma Kumar (1965)

theory of 'muted groups' says that the muted groups are silenced by the structures of domination, and the latter force the muted groups to structure their understanding of the world through the models of dominant groups. According to this theory free expression of the muted group is blocked at the level of ordinary direct language (Moore 1988:3-4). Therefore, they resort to use the language of the dominant and convey their alternative model of society in shrouded forms that the dominants may hear in the space where the control cannot be exercised. This space is the ritual space which is a 'luminal phase' in terms of Van Gennep, and this phase is characterized with role reversals and other counter actions which are not acceptable in the regular course of life. Victor Turner terms this normative course of action as 'structure' and the luminal phase as 'anti-structure' to return to the structure later. The space of anti-structure sanctioned in ritual forms is an insulated space in which the muted voice their 'frustrated communication' of Edwin Ardener (Moore 1988:3-4).

Referential Function

The ritual's grammar includes different castes taking up traditionally assigned roles and follows the procedure required by tradition any violation attracts either the wrath of the deities or conflicts among the participants. A ritual organizer once said that it is the ritual of Mala and Madiga since without them it can not be organized; he also emphatically said there is no high or low status and there is no practice of untouchability in the ritual. It may be a metaphoric overstatement, but it does speak of temporary suspension of the dominant structure. The pure and impure concepts underlie in the structuring of the ritual, the Mala and Madiga take up the low roles and upper castes take up roles that do not defile them in the language of pure and impure. The Dalits do represent the impure while the upper castes represent the impure.

As the upper caste person who may not be Brahmin acts as priest, the Asadi takes analogous position praising the goddess the role assigned by her, and narrate her powers and her association or relation with various castes. It distances him from others or a higher level from others in the ritual context. The Asadi's relation with the goddess is the indexical one and he renders 'performative speech'⁴ act at the end by abusing the upper castes that pleases the goddess, and thus she blesses the upper castes.

At the referential level as a text, a product, it is constructed on several binaries such as male – female, Shiva – Shakti, upper caste Reddy – Mala Dalit caste, caste – tribe, settled – nomadic, life – death, sickness – health, arrogant – submissive, obstinate – obedient, menstruation – free from menstruation, father-in-law –daughter-in-law, father-in-law and son-in-law, young woman – old woman, wealth and poverty, benevolent - malevolent etc. These stories are constructed beautifully lineally with different plots, morals and ethics. These refer to the divine and human orders, the failure of humans and benevolence of the divine in correcting the humans. However, the foundation on which the edifice of myth constructed is the binary opposition between death – life. It is cyclic.

⁴Austin (1962)

Cultural Performance

While the stories are narrated with a characteristic intonation, and sarcastic remarks on the recalcitrant, Katam Reddy and Eendra brothers, the audience laugh and enjoy the performance which reflects their personal engagement in identifying with the oppressed but at the end are the beneficiaries. The Asadi as narrator exhibits artistic style of entertaining the audience and the same effectively communicating the cultural values particularly honouring the female deities. Complementary roles of various castes are insisted though their mundane occupations are depreciated. In appreciation of the service and the talent demonstrated, the Asadi is presented with cash reward or even gold ring or chain. The audience acquires the knowledge of the goddess, her powers, intrinsic relations with low castes etc.

Asadi as Linguistic “Indexical Shifter”⁵

As indexical sign vehicle as stated above Asadi refers to the status assigned to him by the deity to render her stories only by him but not by others, a rare privilege. Here the time is obliterated or suppressed as even after the ritual he enjoys the same status, in his association with her in syntagmatic relation. But other times he is no different from other Dalit experiencing the same ignominy and oppression. So he is seen as shifter with the “shifts” of reference; Dalit and as indexical to the goddess with higher status.

Semantic Function - The Alternate Model from the Story of Malas

The analysis follows semantic meaning of the stories that is different from referential meaning. The stories of Malas and Gone Kattam Reddy signify the gender and caste inequality but more on the former. Here, gender is conflated with religious dogma, over the superiority and inferiority of Shiva and Shakti. To this is added caste dimension drawing a contrast between the upper caste and Dalit, represented by Katam Reddy or Vema reddy and Sareendla Malaiah or Asadi. There is a representation of tribe also that does not signify any contrast between caste and tribe, with the presence of Erukala woman, the soothsayer; caste and tribe are associational and can even be substituted at the lower level.

The women found in these stories represent Shakti as well as universal category of woman. However, the universal category is marked by upper caste and tribe, and all these are united by common biological and social experience of male domination and marginality. The fragmented, subordinated and marginalized women are symbolized in the goddess, a more powerful being than the rest. However, while the Reddy woman shows at most humility to the dominant structure, yet she has different view on the gender superiority, the female is superior over the male. In the same manner the Dalit woman follows the dominant ideology obeying the demand of her husband and becomes the victim of sacrifice. The tribal woman, who represents the goddess, on the other hand subdues the Reddy with punishment.

The tribe stands outside the caste society; closer to the nature, forest, uncultivated, indigenous, autochthonous power. It contrasts with caste, identified with culture, bringing the

⁵See Silverstein (1976)

natural landscape under cultivation and control. Interaction between the two categories is in terms of subjugation and alienation. As the caste and caste system stands away from the forest and nature, yet they depend on them. The tribal woman represents the primeval power, source of energy and regeneration. The caste village and men still have to depend on the woman and tribal power.

The Katam Reddy's refusal to give respect or honour to goddess who appeared to him in the form of a tribal woman, is to refuse to grant equal status to woman. The story argues for supremacy female, of Shakti, over male. When contrasted with Katam Reddy of the second story, Katam Reddy is arrogant and disobedient to the goddess for which he is punished. Sreendla Malaiah is a devotee of the goddess Poleramma. He did not hesitate even to sacrifice one of his wives and his sons. As a boon for the sacrifice offered with which the goddess is pleased, he not only got back his wife and son to life, the son became an Asadi who is ordained to sing songs in praise of the goddess in Kaliyuga. This is a privilege and honour, and power achieved with close association with the goddess.

The third story is also about the gender but in a different way wherein, the conflation is between wealth, political-economic power and religion wherein the religion is represented by the female deity. People whether male or female should imbibe benevolence that comes from religion; the compassion knows neither kinship nor gender, but old and sick deserve help. The wealthy contrarily lack generosity and do not help needy people. Here, there is gender equation on the basis of wealth, women follow men, and both being arrogant, and this they all represent male. The brother-in-law who shows kindness to the old woman represents female, and he is dominated by the male. The male arrogance is punished by female.

The Female Deity and Woman as “Indexical Shifters”

The man and woman relationships are structured in hierarchical form in which man is superior to woman in respect of any of the status of woman as daughter/wife (married woman)/widow according to cultural rule. The culture has also created a situation in which woman changes her status when a woman identifies with goddess. However, similar situation in man does not affect any change in his status. Therefore, change of status of woman is an anomaly which defies the referential meaning and thus creates an ambiguity. The shift in the status of woman, culturally endowed high status, need to be reconciled. Thus, change from referential to semantic meaning takes place when woman articulates as a deity shifting her status to higher level, with more power than man. The soothsayer/old woman/sick old woman is the icon of the goddess Poleramma, with physical resemblance in respect of the relationship between the sign vehicle and object, while Rajamma, daughter-in-law of Gone Katam Reddy, is the index of the deity.

It is the procreative power of the woman that the culture grants higher status to woman, though man's contribution is not undermined. This is an alternative cultural dogma articulated in the stories to recognize the contribution of the subordinates. Expression of the same can be noted in the indexical sign, the relation between the object and sign vehicle, where power relations established.

Ritual as Communication Event

The village ritual is a communication event from the perspective of Jane Austin's 'performative utterance'⁶ as it amounts to be doing something. The performance of the ritual is an 'an act of utterance,' an act of accomplishing. It is taken for granted that the goddess would shower blessing having been satisfied with the offering made, honour given and owes cleared through the ritual observance.

The 'locutionary act' performed in the ritual refers to the arrangements made as per the tradition following the grammar of the ritual, following religious norms that conform to other religious performances as detailed above. The Asadi and Dalits play the roles assigned to them that keep the ambience in place, a setting up the stage following the religious procedures. The 'illocutionary act' performed i.e., what those words amount to, refers to semantic meaning of the ritual. The Asadi conveys the alternate model of the society from the perspective of the subordinates, woman and Dalit, through the narratives. Finally, the 'perlocutary act' performed refers to the results achieved. It is the recognition of woman's procreative power, contribution of the subordinates such as Dalit and of course it is done through disclosure of the revilement by the deity and reproduction of the same in public space i.e., shaming the dominants.

Narratives as 'Speech Act'

The 'speech act' is social in nature and meanings are generated in negotiation between the speaker and listener. These meanings are specific to the speaker and listener, other than its meaning according to the language. It takes into consideration the feelings, emotions, attitudes and thoughts of the speaker besides the language, which allows knowing the motives and inner meanings. Asadi narratives as speech act connote the every day experience being Dalit humiliation, paternalistic exploitation, loss of dignity and honour at the hands of the upper caste. These are also expressed through the gender discrimination and male domination for woman in all walks of every day life. It is rejecting the claims of higher status by the dominants, and lower status relegation to the women and Dalit.

The Dialogic Self

The Asadi constructs his self in comparison with the other i.e. Gone Katam Reddy who is portrayed as ungrateful, unabashedly arrogant, misogynist and so on. A comparison is also drawn between the rich and poor, the latter being generous to the needy and poor. The boy running for life is better than the rich adult Katam Reddy for the former tried to help the old woman. Katam Reddy's daughter-in-law despite having received a slap feels for her father-in-law. It amounts to self reflection on the Asadi about his own self. The Asadi got elated when he was asked to repeat the story of the Malas, and also when the audience expressed sympathy with Rajamma. This gave more spirit and enthusiasm to tell the story of Endar caste. There is also construction of human selfhood beyond the restricted boundaries of caste and gender which are

⁶ Austin (1962)

social and artificial limitations. Social Justice has been located in the goddess but not among wealthy and arrogant men or outside the social realm. Asadi, Dalit, woman, young boys are ones who are endowed with qualities of sympathy and human values which should be placed high in the social order.

Culture and Counter Culture

Finally, the question whether the narratives be viewed as ‘counter culture’ or a form of resistance to the dominant ideology shall be addressed. The ardent seekers of robust and authentic resistance from the subalterns against the dominants simply dismiss the argument made or else see them at the margins of resistance. To give reply to this kind of dismissive assertion, one shall look at the way culture has been reconceptualized recently due to various developments in social science discourses particularly with reference to self and agency and change of global order. Culture is multi-vocal and polyphonus and it mediates between individual and community, and it is historical and borne out of subjectivity shared with other members of the society. Therefore, Dalits and women, the dominated do have their own view of culture, a vantage point of view, and they do contest the dominant structure and do articulate within the given space using the same language of the dominants.

The resistance expressed in the narratives also needs to be read in the light of other forms of expression. For example, the song that depicts a Madiga girl’s falling in love with a Brahmin youth unambiguously mocks at the superiority of Brahmin (Appendix -1). While singing this song the Madiga woman was all through mirthful with bursts of laughter frequently. The protagonist is able to force the Brahmin to transgress the purity and engage in the most polluting activity of not only touching the dead calf but also eating it. The message sign signifies that no one can be beyond the human desires and emotions in the language of the culture.

The resistance is not to be romanticized; the resisters are as fragmented as the dominants with different class interests. Their selves agree on some issues against the dominant at the same time they do disagree on some other issues. What counts is the consciousness of domination and expressing resistance in various forms available to them under the given cultural frame and congenial circumstances. Women are diverse in these narratives, but they can be categorized into two groups: those that supported men and those that challenged men. The youngest wife Malaiah became a victim meekly without any resistance, though other ran way which means is available to show her resistance. The other identifies herself with her husband who allies with the goddess. In the story of Eendra caste, the women support their husbands and brother; they ally with the male against the female. Thus, essentially the opposition, in structural terms, is between male and female. All the narratives demonstrate power laden relations between the genders and wealthy and poor that corresponds with upper castes and lower castes. The narratives articulate against the power exercised by the dominants and their structured relations and also resistance to such instances.

Conclusion

The above analysis approves to a great degree the concept of culture as it is re-conceptualized⁷ as non-essentialized character of a group; it is non-homogenic; not uncontested sharedness; it is historically embedded, and politicized. In this perspective subaltern and marginal have certain cultural authenticity that respond to the domination in their own way. In this reconceptualization of culture self is constructed through the presence of the other which is instrumental for cultural production or construction. Agency (individual/subject) is the dynamic principle that interacts with the other, and subjectivity enables the agent to reflect on the self and reacts to the other's actions. In this connection it is apt to note Ortner's contention,

“Agency is not an entity that exists apart from cultural construction (nor is it a quality one has only when one is whole or when one is an individual). Every culture, every subculture, every historical moment, constructs its own forms of agency, its own modes of enacting the process of reflecting on the self and the world and of acting simultaneously within and upon what one finds there.” (1995:186).

At the same the narratives as dialogic utterance negotiates with human subjectivity. The upper castes and men who dominate the lower castes and women learn to be humble, they get the experience what it is to be sub-ordinated, ridiculed and abused in public. They find a window through which they see how they are being perceived by the lower castes and Dalits and women. They learn to recognize the importance and contributory role of the subordinates who deserve appreciation and recognition. In society none is indispensable, interdependency brings harmony.

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⁷van Meijl provides the present conceptualization of culture in anthropology saying, "A 'culture' is no longer considered to speak with one voice, so to speak, but to be multi-vocal and polyphonous. Thus, a distinction must be between, on the one hand, a traditional discourse in which culture was equated with a boundary and, on the other hand, a new discourse in which culture is not represented as a reified essence but, instead, as a political process of contestation among individual members or groupings over the power to define social situation (Wright, 1998). The dynamic relationship between *individual* and community has in other words become characteristic of the anthropological concept of culture in recent history (2008:172-173)

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Song of Madiga Girl and Brahmin Youth

- 1 Singer: Handsome Brahmin while praying in the lake
while praying - oh my brother!
A cunning Madiga damsel came that side
cunning damsel came, oh my brother!
- 5 The Madiga damsel liked the Brahmin
liked the man, oh my brother!
- Madiga: "If you want, why don't you come, my Lord"
why don't you come my Lord? oh my brother!
- Brahmin: "I don't know your village, I don't know you"
- 10 I don't know, oh my brother!
- Madiga: "Compound wall all around and lime plastering"
lime plastering, oh my brother!
"Near lime plastering, village boundary"
village boundary, oh my brother!
- 15 Near village boundary, the path of Suranna"
Suranna path, oh my brother!
- Brahmin: "I will come and I will come beautiful angel"
Beautiful angel, oh my brother!
- Madiga: "In the compound of Reddy, a calf died"
- 20 calf died, oh my brother!
"Go and bring dragging its leg"
bring dragging, oh my brother!
"Cut slowly with small knives"
cut slowly, oh my brohter!
- 25 Brahmin: "How do I cut, I am an young Brahmin"
young Brahmin, oh my brother!
- Madiga: "Put your *janjam'* on the peg"
on the peg, oh my brother!
"Cut slowly with small knives
Cut wide with big knives
30 "Cut slowly with small knives"
cut slowly, oh my brother!
"Cut wide with big knives"
cut widely, oh my brother!
- 35 Singer: Cooked delicious food with chilies and salt
cooked delicious food, oh my brother!
- Madiga: "You feed me first and last morsel"
you feed me Sir, oh my brother!
- Brahmin: "How do I feed, my beautiful angel":
- 40 beautiful angel, oh my brother!