NARRATIVE TRADITION AS A CULTURAL ALLEGORY: Reflections from Telugu Folklore

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In nucleated villages of upland Andhra Pradesh, the monsoon is the primary source of water in the absence of perennial rivers. The task of peasantry became two fold - first, the channeling and augmenting of rainwater flow, and second, streamlining of cropping pattern (wet and dry) with the flow of water. This situation demands much labour. Fetching labour seasonally could throw productivity and costs out of sync and causes migration of labour that could adversely affect the rural economy. One way of solving such a crisis is restricting the mobility of labour by a 'moral economy' where reciprocity norms are regulated by subsistence (Scott 1977). Hence, it is not uncommon to tie the agrarian proletariat to the land (i.e. bonded labour) in these villages. The 'bard tradition' perhaps emerged as a device to enable such restriction. It is interesting to note that the 'bard tradition' exists in the upland cultures more than in other cultures such as valley or forest cultures.

This further complicates the social organization of these villages. The identity of patron and bard are construed through a process of symbiosis - one survives because of the other through a share in economic resources given by patrons to minstrels. The latter creates "identity" through the narrative and reminds them of their roles and social obligations in a larger social structure.

This leads to a social stratification within the castes, the parameter being the level of involvement in agrarian tasks. The bard tradition can be seen as a mediating factor to sustain peasantry and agrarian proletariat within the village space through the recitation of caste myth. Anti-structural tendencies are explicit in their oral narratives and rites and rituals, which wish for role-reversals of castes vis-à-vis the concept of purity-pollution.

In table-1, it is evident that every bard community has a narrative to perform to the patron community. The Jambapuranam narrative, the caste myth of the Madiga community, is presented here to postulate distinct features of the folk narratives found in the form of caste myths of rural India in general and Andhra Pradesh in particular.

The oral text in its performative context is collected from a minstrel community of the Madigas namely, the Cindu Madigas. Two dimensions of the Jambapuranam are considered here - the story's causal structure (plot) and the sequence of events as ordered in the narrative by the narrator (discourse).

(1) Plot as Narrative Structure:

The plot of Jambapuranam is tri-episodic—the Adi Puranam, Sakti Puranam and Basava Puranam. The myth being a multi-plot structure, it can be performed independently or as a whole. Performers manipulate duration of each unit of performance both in vertical and linear temporality by transiting between the realms of performance text and mental text with the Madiga as an axis. The performers can shift back and forth in the text in narrating the units of the text.

Table-1: Bards and their Caste Myths

S.No.	Castes	Dependent Castes	Caste Myth
1.	Brahmanas	Vipravinodis	Magic
2.	Vaisya	Viramusti	Kanyaka katha
3.	Visva brahmana Panasolu	Runjalavallu	Runja Kulapuranam
4.	Mutrasi	Kaki padagala pandavullavaru	Patam katha
5.	Gauda	Gauda jetti Ekoti	Gauda puranam
6.	Padmasali	Sadhana surulu Kuna puli	Magic
7.	Mangali	Addanki siggadu	Mangali puranam
8.	Chakali	Ganjikuti masayya	Madelu puranam
9.	Kummari	Pekkari	—
10.	Golla	Mandecchu Oggu pujarlu	Butta bommalu Yadava kathalu
11.	Reddi	Picchukakuntlu	Reddi puranam
12.	Madiga	Chindu Dakkali Baindla Masti Nulaka chendayya	Jambapuranam/Yaksaganam Patam katha Renuka Yallamma puranam Adipuranam Pujari, kolupulu/kathalu Ritual/recitation
13.	Mala	Gurrapollu	Patamkatha/kulapuranam
14.	Lambada	Bhats / Bhatts	Banjara kathalu
15.	Nayakapodu	Korrajulu/toti/Pujarlu	Patamkatha
16.	Gondu	Pruthan	Vamsa katha
17.	Koya	Doli	—

The text of Jambapuranam is ritually enacted by the Cindu Madigas. The performance of Jambapuranam commences with the beating of drums. The protagonist of the play is taken in a procession to the place of performance. The other characters such as the Brahmin and the comic characters prepare the audience to receive the performance of Jambapuranam. With the entry of Jambavantudu, the protagonist, the performance commences. The whole performance takes a discourse style between the protagonist who represents the pancamavarna and the Brahmin that represents the system of caturvarna. These two characters voice arguments for and against the high and low castes. The Brahmin questions the wisdom of Jambavamuni, the ancestor of the Madigas. Jambavamuni patiently replies to all the queries of the Brahmin and upholds his occupation and his caste role in the society as one that is embedded in the dharmic tradition. In the process of dialogue both the characters bring in issues related to economic changes vis-à-vis social relations. For instance, though the leather buckets are replaced by pump

A performer of Jambapuranam

sets, Jambavamuni still finds the role of Madigas in supplying certain leather material such as washers to run them.

The performance runs four to five hours in a dialogue-song-dance matrix. This performance is followed by the performance of Yellamma vesham, which is a ritual possession that ends with bloody sacrifice.

(2) Narrative performance as Discourse:

The performance of the caste myth Jambapuranam is a symbolic system that ties the community of Madigas to each other and with the rest of the village. To understand the narrative discourse of the Jambapuranam, it is imperative to know the cultural milieu of the Madigas who own the narrative.

In pre-independence India, the Madigas were considered among the outcastes living outside the frame of the Varna system. They are treated as panchama varna or 'untouchables'. The Madigas along with the Malas live outside the main village. Their chief profession is scavenging, including the disposal of the dead carcasses. They developed occupations related to leather–skinning, tanning, and manufacturing leather goods. They performed all the lowest kinds of services to the upper castes. They take charge of the ox or buffalo as soon as it dies. They remove the skin

and tan it and eat the carcasses. Some of the skins are used for covering the crude drums known as Tappeta or Dappu that are largely used in the village festivals. The main duty of Madigas is curing and tanning hides and making crude leather articles. The Madiga is paid in kind and he has to supply sandals for peasants, belts for the bulls, and all the necessities of agriculture.

The Madigas also call themselves as Jambavas and claim to be descended from Jambu or Adi-Jambuvadu who is perhaps the Jambavantudu of the Ramayana. Edgar Thurston recorded that some Madigas, called Sindhuvallu, act scenes from the Mahabharatha and Ramayana or the story of Ankalamma. They also assert that they fell to their present low position as the result of a curse and tell the following story.

"Kamadhenu, the sacred cow of the puranas, was yielding plenty of milk, which the Devatas alone used. Vellamanu, a Madiga boy was anxious to taste the milk, but was advised by Adi-Jambuvadu to abstain from it. He however secured some by stealth and thought that the flesh would be sweeter still. Learning this, Kamadhenu died. The Devatas cut its carcass into four parts, of which they gave one to Adi-Jambavudu. But they wanted the cow brought back to life, and each brought his share of it for the purpose of reconstruction. But Vellamanu had cut a bit of the flesh, boiled it, and breathed on it, so that, when the animal was recalled to life, its chin sank, as the flesh had been defiled. This led to the sinking of the Madigas in the social scale."

The following variant of this myth is given in the Mysore Census Report, 1891.

"At a remote period, sage Jambava Rishi was questioned by Lord Siva about why the former was habitually late at the Divine Court. The sage replied that he had to personally attend to the wants of his children every day, which consequently made his attendance late...Siva, pitying the children gave the rishi the cow Kamadhenu, which supplied their every want. Once while Jambava was absent at Ishvara's court, another sage named Sankya visited Jambava's hermitage, where his son Yugamuni hospitably entertained him. The cream that he served was so savoury that the guest tried to induce Jambava's son Yugamuni to kill the cow and eat her flesh. In spite of the latter's refusal, Sankya killed the animal and prevailed upon the others to partake of the meat. On his return from court Jambava found the inmates of his hermitage eating the sacred cow's beef and took both Sankya and Yugamuni over to the court for judgement. Instead of entering, the two offenders remained outside, Sankya rishi standing on the right side and Yugamuni on the left of the doorway. Siva cursed them to become Chandalas or outcastes. Hence, Sankya's descendants are designated right hand caste or Holayas (or malas); while those who sprang from Yugamuni and his wife Matangi are called left-hand caste or Madigas". The occupation of the latter is said to be founded on the belief that by making shoes for

people, the sin their ancestor had committed by killing the cow would be expiated.

Thus, the belief of the Madiga is that the gods cursed them to be out caste and to remain as left-hand caste.

The above presentation of the narrative, Jambapuranam as plot and discourse leads me to postulate the following as the characteristic features of folk narrative, especially the caste myth narrative):

1. The ethos of folk narrative basically lies in voracy (a neolog used for 'orality'). The literate rely on physical temporality measured in terms of lunar or solar time frames whereas the folk stand on metaphysical (cosmic) temporality based on their narratives.

2. Time and space within the narrative becomes cyclical and hence the story oscillates between the past and the present without references by the narrator (or the author). The marked references such as 'flashback' or 'soliloquy' are used by the narrator/author in the literate narratives.

3. This cyclical nature is achieved in the oral narratives by a structural formulation in the plot structure itself. The plot structure of folk narrative is always a multi- structural phenomenon and, therefore, one plot leading to the other in the construction of the story becomes its significant structural feature.

4. Folk narrative is shared and owned by a group and hence it is a collective enterprise. In the patron and client relationship system of Madigas and Cindu Madigas, instead of economic compulsions, the ritual compulsions created through the belief system are vital for their social organization. According to the ritual compulsion, the Cindu Madigas take the role of priests to perform certain purity-pollution rites by performing 'Yellamma vesham'. This helps the community feel secure from evil forces and curses of the gods.

5. Since folk narrative is a collective device it is anonymous. The texts of the caste myths are orally transmitted and passed on from one generation to the other. Their authors are unknown. Folklore text therefore, are not only an end product but also a part of complex cultural process that are reflected in their expression.

6. The anonymity makes the folk narrative live beyond a single life time and be inherited as a traditional narrative.

7. Folk narrative acquires versions and variations. Versions are repeated retelling of prior narrative texts in translated, transformed and modified forms in different cultural contexts. These differential retellings would create variations in texts, reflecting the milieu under which those particular versions were shaped and transmitted.

8. Folk narrative is a combination of Mimesis and Diegesis. The latter is considered as telling, where the author narrate actions describe what is in the character's mind and emotions. Mimesis is showing what is going on in characters' inner thoughts and emotions through his external actions. In most caste myths mimesis works at the non-verbal communicative level whereas diegesis operates at the verbal communication level.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that the folk narrative distinguishes itself from the other literary narratives in its performative context. The community internalizes the narrative and it becomes a device to symbolically represent the community that owns it.

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