Performance of Caste Myth: Towards Negotiating Identities

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Abstract: This paper captures the different facets of a pastoral community through the ritual performances that exhibit the nature of dualism between the content and the expression modes on applying performance theory.

Current narrative theory is interdisciplinary in its genesis, scope and quest and is stranded on a number of dualistic conceptions and models. Dualism persists throughout narrative hermeneutics in the form of doublet terms such as deep structure and surface manifestation; content plane and expression plane; and signified and signifier. All imply dual positioning, yet meet in a ground where they blend and clash. Narratives, when performed in an ethnic context, appropriate the status of cultural event and hence become discursive subject both to those who perform the narrative and who participate as audience of that performance. Complex relationships that a performance produces are the key to the social alignment of the community, which is performing the narrative, especially the caste myths. All the more, when they are performed in a ritual context, polyvocal identities are produced for it engages itself in a dialogic process between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ of the performer/audience of the community that is constructing the narrative through a performance. This innately implies that a community in relation to others in a given social set up distinguishes its members and at the same time relates them with others. Since ritualisation of performance requires material objects to demark the event as sacred and hence hocus pocus (god given), performance metamorphoses in symbolic structures negating often the real social status or even resorting for higher claims with ethno centric over tones.
This paper attempts to bring out the nuances of a pastoral community and their worldview through the ritual performance of Mallanna katha that innately produce dualism between the content plane and expression plane and between the form and the meaning in the backdrop on the basis of performance theoretical frame. The paper is divided into two sections- section one enumerates the approach of performance studies in general to communal enactments and their intrinsic value to the community that internalises and survives by it. The second section deals with the pastoral community of Andhra Pradesh, namely, the Kuramas and their cast myth (mallanna katha) enactment known as mallanna kolupulu and its dialogical premise in constructing polysemy to the cultural event itself.

Section- I
Performance Centred Approach- A Theoretical Premise:

An important reason for the shift to performance approach from Mentalist Structuralism is philosophical, epistemological and academic outlook, which changed considerably the relative position of a researcher, and the material with which he has been dealing. Till 1970, American Folkloristics was involved in ‘Mentalistic Structuralism’ or “the mentalist’s approach” wherein humans were conceived of as language and symbol producing machines, each operating as a unit in communication system. Hence, culture was depicted as dynamic information bearing system in which individuals demonstrated their humanity through ability to understand and produce meaningful utterances (Arahams1992: 34). The Mentalist Structuralists confined therefore to textual interpretations from an epic point of view. Consequently, this approach in the initial phases of Formalism mainly concentrated the analysis on narratives to cognate plot, character, and genre. In due course, when Structuralism came under the influence of naratology, performance-centred approach was impelled to the study of cultural expressive behaviours in a given phenomenon. Accordingly, Structuralist theories squabbled that each narrative has two parts, a story, i.e., the content, and a discourse, i.e., the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. It posits the existence of two independent levels of narrative structure. The first is basement level underlying every narrative, which is considered as “deep structure” or “basic story”, the second is the narrative discourse itself where the basic story is actualised, articulated, realised, and manifested in some form or in many different forms, styles, and media (Chatman 1978:19-21). This indispensable perceptive led to the realisation of “version” and “variation” as one of the basic features to distinguish a folklore item from those of the others. Claude Bremond maintains that every narrative encompasses “a layer of autonomous significance endowed with a structure that can be isolated from the whole of the message and this basic autonomous structure can be transposed from one to the other medium without losing its
essential properties” (Bremond 1964:4) For this reason, the subject of a story may serve as a theme for a ballad, an epic or a myth. This transcendental nature of the story is the strongest reason for arguing that narratives are indeed structures independent of any medium. When stories get transformed into discourse (or performance), dualism occurs at two levels. Firstly, it occurs in time orders of narrative structures as “discourse time” and “story time”, i.e., between the length of the time it takes to perform the narrative and the length of the time engaged by the events referred to in it. Secondly, the set of events that occurred in one order can be narrated in another order or in what is called in non-linear sequence. The folklorists who followed performance centred approach, contrary to the genre based analytical categories, argued for ‘ethnic genre’ which cannot be seen in isolation or compartmentalised as this would affect the very meaning and function of the genre itself. They took the lead from Socio-linguists and ethnography of communication and argued for analysing text in the context of a large culture specific system of communication. Dell Hymes (1973) and Tedlock (1972) were some of the scholars who were the force behind “ethnography of speaking approach”, which apparently became the starting point for performance studies.

The performance theory views performance as an art of communication. Most performance traditions are verbal expressive and found ‘in action’. The performance study basically is the study of events and all that related to an event: a setting, a social context, the performer and the audience. Hence, any performance study should logically be based on live presentations rather than ‘dead’ or patricide’ texts which speaks only when the researcher wants them to speak. All the more, no performance is identical to that of any previous ones as every performance acted in a given context and has its own version and variation. In that sense, every performance is unique.

Nevertheless, any performance is interplay of different ‘units’ having ‘text’ as ‘centri focal’ at different levels of interaction. The nine units are: (1) Text (2) Performer (3) Audience (4) Context (5) Event (6) Performance media (7) Internal organisation (8) Social situation and (9) Cultural milieu. Externally, the zones of performance markers, performance setters, conventional performances and optional/causal performances operate in the performance situation. Text is the nexus of the performance, which gets altered or affected with slightest changes in any of the other units of performances. In the same way different ‘units’ are inter and intra related. The cooperation and co-ordination of these units is the basis for any performance.
Diagram-I: Performance Structure:

Performance of Caste Myth: Towards Negotiating Identities
The text is performed by a performer to a given audience on a specified event in a context. Any change in any of the units would directly cause a change in the text that is performed. The social or cultural background of the performer and the social obligation towards his patron community on one hand, and on the other, time, space and place of performance would also change the text indirectly. They act as outside forces to the performances, hence they may be termed as secondary forces. Their influence would only be peripheral in the sense that they can only affect the size of the performance text to shrink or get enlarged. The change in any one of the inside forces or primary factors which are noted in the inner box would cause an immense change in the text. It may even cause ‘generic’ change of the art form itself. For instance, the theme of the text, folk Ramayana which is widely prevalent throughout India in orality, when performed by a group of bards called Budagajanjams, to their traditional audience as a part of frugal rite, the genre may be called as ‘Sarada katha or Burrakatha’; whereas the same theme if performed by a group of artists as a play on a festival occasion it may be called as ‘Veedhibhagothm’. Thus, the art form changes (with all their accomplices such as instruments, etc.) when there is a change in the inner forces.

Tri- parted model:

Performance as verbal art has three dimensions:

1) An aesthetic mode of communication:

In observing performances of verbal art, Hymes, Bauman, Abrahams and others recognised that they can be characterised by the way they are carried out. That is, while in other speech behaviour, such as conversation, attention tends to focus more on the context or what is said; in verbal art, attention focuses on the competence exhibited in performing or on how it is said. Advancing a definition of verbal art as performance, Bauman writes that “performance as a mode of spoken verbal communication consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence” (Bauman 1977:43). It is an interactive process involving perception and transmission of all types of signs through various modes of communication. Fundamentally, performance as a mode of spoken verbal communication insists in the assumption of communication competence. This competence rests on the knowledge and the ability to speak in socially appropriate ways. Folk performances demand a sense of accountability of the performer and his audiences. From this
point of view of the audiences, the act of expression of the performer is judged if not evaluated, unconsciously, by asking him to repeat the performance in calendarical frames. On the part of the performer, his skills and display of competence elevate him to the level of customary obligation if not right to perform. This reciprocation based on norms and moral obligation between the performer and the audience brings them together in a social context for an event. Thus, the verbal art becomes a performance with all its ethnographic values.

Like Bauman and Abrahams, Hymes writings on verbal art as a way of speaking stresses that they are presented in a particularly aesthetic mode. Hymes argues that both folklore and ethnography of speaking share an interesting speech communication and that this speech is to be approached as having an aesthetic, expressive or stylistic dimension. In defining performance as cultural behaviour for which a person assumes responsibility for presentation to an audience, Hymes cautions against using the term ‘performance’ as merely a synonym for conduct and activity. For Hymes, performance is not behaviour, nor culture, nor conduct, nor communication, but is “something creative, realised, achieved, and even transcendent of the ordinary course of the events” (Hymes 1966:149). Bauman, Ben Amos, Hymes and Abrahams all agree that certain varying and interacting feature mark speech behaviour as speech performance. Arguing that folklore is a social interaction via the art media that differs from other modes of speaking and gesturing, Ben Amos uses Dundes’ scheme of text, texture and context to distinguish folklore from non-folklore. Textual markers such as opening and closing formulae set the narration apart. Textural features such as a distinct intonation or rhyme also set folklore apart. And contextual conventions such as requirements for a special time, place and audience also mark folklore an aesthetic category of speech. To explain the formation of interpretative frame certain meta-communicative devices are signalled out. These devices are termed as key to the performances. The most widely documented keys for performance include: 1) special codes, 2) figurative language, 3) parallelism, 4) special paralinguistic features, 5) special formulae, 6) appeal to tradition, and 7) disclaimer of performance (Bauman 1977:10-13). These keys are culture specific and authenticate the performance. Pure performance according to Abrahams involves a high level of co-ordination so that prediction and participation in common may be ensured.

2) Performance Event:
Performances as a cultural system attract researchers’ attention primarily on those genres that are conventionally performed. This calls for a performance to be undertaken as that one arises out of a sense of cultural duty and traditional obligation. Milton singer calls them as “Cultural Performances”
They are as a rule scheduled events involving the most highly formalised performance forms and accomplished by the traditional performers of the community. Apart from the widely found public performances, there are ‘optional’ performance contexts of everyday life that are spontaneous and unscheduled. The roles of performer and audience are not rigid in the optional performance context.

The structure of performance events is the product of the integral play of many factors, including setting, act sequence and ground rules of performances. Verbal performances are subject to a range of community ground rules that regulate speaking in general, but there will also be a set of ground rules that are specific to performance itself. According to Joel Sherzer, the performance genres, acts, events, and roles cannot occur in isolation, but are mutually interactive and interdependent (Sherzer 1974). Any of these factors may be used as a point of departure or point of entry into the description and analysis of the performance system of a community. However, ultimately ethnographic statement one makes about performance, as part of social life must incorporate them all in some degree.

A cluster of interacting variables characterises a performance event. The physical setting such as the season, time of the day and location may create expectations for the performance of certain genres. Within a physical setting, the psychological ambience or ‘scene’ may further affect the performance. The type of participants present and their particular personalities, relationships and goals influence the potential scenes and performances that might emerge in a particular setting. As participants and scenes change within a particular setting, different expectations for verbal art performances emerge. These implicit and explicit expectations may be termed “ground rules for performance” or “the set of cultural themes and ethical and social interactional organising principles that govern the conduct of performance. For example, a specific event may require a certain type of participants (all female), a certain setting (a special room/location), a special psychological scene (ceremonial), a certain cultural theme (initiation into god’s service) special genres (secret songs, pledges, dramatisation), and special interactional patterns (elders lead, youth follow). As a consequence, not only texts but also events and social structure may be emergent in performance.

3) Cultural Specificity and Variability:

Any cultural system cannot survive in isolation. The inter and intra cultural forces which operate on ethnic communities, be it dominant or subdued result in acculturation and ‘mutual borrowing’. With the result even the residual cultural elements may be incorporated into the dominant culture in a complementary process. This process was termed as ‘emergent culture’
by the culture specialists. In the ‘emergent cultures’ new meanings, values, practices, experiences and significations are continuously created as part of social life and therefore, performances are uniquely patterned within specific culture and variable when one examines them across cultures. This concept constitutes an important corrective to the prevalent tendency to generalise about organisation, style and significance of verbal art based on the study of verbal art in one culture. For instance, the Parry and Lord’s “Oral Formulaic theory” on oral composition, derived from the study on Yugoslavian culture was applied to other cultures. The critiques of this simplistic adoption of the Parry-Lord hypothesis point out that its proponents often fail to examine actual performances within various cultures. Ruth Finnegan opined that “when one starts looking hard at the concept of “oral composition’, it becomes clear that it is not a single unique process, but takes different forms in different cultures and circumstances” (Finnegan 1970:65). Pointing to the lack of cross-cultural data behind such theorising, Roger Abrahams notes that while the Parry-Lord theory is “really an hypothesis and a related method for collecting performances and local aesthetic observation on performance”, it has “taken a rule or law of composition and used as a means once again of focussing away from living performances and back onto texts” (Abrahams 1968: 11)

Combating these tendencies to ignore the differences in verbal art forms in various cultures, the performances approaches argue that the analyst must first describe the specific ways an individual speech community organises its verbal behaviour. While many speech communities may conceptualise their traditional performances in terms of genres, others may organise their performances in terms of speech acts, social roles or speech events. According to Bauman, genres and speech acts are analytically distinct with acts referring to speech behaviour and genres referring to the verbal products of that behaviour. Thus ethnographer of the performance must look for the behaviours that a community associates with performance. And certain social roles may also carry varying expectations of performance. Performance genres, acts, events and roles do not occur in isolation, but are mutually interactive and interdependent. The analytical distinctions between the four provide an ethnographer with an index of possible ways in which a community may conceptualise its verbal art.

The performance approach therefore, advocates for holistic ethnographic accounts to understand any given folk genre. The major shift in folkloristic practices in the post World War II period is collection and theorising the data by the same persons. Theoretical observations were constantly tempered by the field experience. Theories began to insist on the reporting not only of the performer in that community but also the power
attributed to the performer and other such situating factors. Until this step, the study of text formerly had been centred on the keyword “variation”, a term useful primarily for the comparison of the text. As fieldwork and theory came together, two kinds of repertoire analysis are constructed. The first of this focuses on the individual performer, accordingly that much of the best work in the past had been done by working with the major informants who were treated as if they were representing the performing community as a whole. The second dimension hub on to the aesthetic and moral choices involved on the part of the individual performer. This drift towards the repertory analysis is encouraged by parallel developments in the ethnography of communication, which calls for the understanding of the named expressive resources of the groups and an observation on the native genres.

Thus, the performance centred Folkloristics was not an over attempt to do way with previous ways of collecting, organising and analysing but to address questions arising from the introduction of new technological devices into the process of collection and preservation. It became possible to collect more and more contextual material in the course of the field experience and to use these to develop a fuller understanding of the ways in which the traditional practices enter into the people’s lives.

Section-II
From the performance studies’ point of view, folklore and expressive forms of different cultural strands can be distinguished based on performer-audience continuum. Essentially, one can separate folklore and popular culture on the basis of dissemination method, i.e., performance mode. According to Roger Abrahams, folklore exists in face-to-face encounter that leads purely to oral transmission. In other words expressive forms in folklore are grounded on the maxim of performer-audience interrelationships. The manner and level of relationship between the two, forms the crux of the “structure of the context”.

As a product of this discourse, scholars brought forth new dimensions in the studies of performance during the early nineties. Hitherto scholars viewed structure of the performance based on “textual’ movement, i.e., the way text is textured and knitted the audience and performance through a story line with meaningful and communicable modes of expression. Therefore, structures are essentially “textual” and hence contexts are basically referential in function. However, the idea of context and structure as independent units both effecting the text of performance is gradually being undermined by the scholars practising new ethnography. The field data collected not as a participant observer but as a researcher, whose presence as a researcher is neither concealed nor disguised but informed to the community, made the performance
approach more democratic than ever. In other words, acceptance of observer as an outsider made him to realise his own position and limitations and allowed him to look for “polyphonic” and dialogical way of collecting and representing the data.

This new premise in methodology of post-modern or new ethnography negated the idea of sequencing events through narrative and paved way for looking for contexts, which has the potential to create structure of a given performance. Therefore, ‘structure of context’ rather than ‘context’ and ‘structure’ became the centri-focal to the performance studies. It is ‘context’ that has its own structure determines the level of performance. So to say, structure of both text and performance emerge within a structure of ‘context’ rather than a mere ‘context’. Here, I wish to clarify that the early performance theoreticians used the term ‘context’ as a temporal phenomenon, which situates the ‘event’. It is presently viewed as one that reflects the interpersonal relations between performers and audience. Performance, in this sense carries the potential to rearrange the structure of social relations within the performance and perhaps beyond it. The structure of social roles, relations and interaction emerged as the casual variants in the performances and their communicative meanings.

This study is based on Oggukatha performance observed and documented during the fieldwork conducted by our Centre from February 9, 1997 to February 14, 1997 at Amberpet in Hyderabad. Family members of Oggollu, whose family name is Koduri, and identified by the locals as Devuni, perform hereditarily jatara (fair) of god Mallanna annually. Mallanna is the god of shepherds (i.e. kuruma/golla pastoralists), whose heroic exploits are rhetorically enacted through a sequence of ritual along with verbal narration in this jatara. Oggus, a subcaste within the kuruma community are traditionally ‘bards’ who act as priests and perform the rituals of Mallanna for various occasions at familiar and communal levels.

The jatara of Mallanna at Amberpet runs for five days starting with Mallanna’s marriage and culminating with ‘Oggollu’ transforming as his devotees, rather kalabhaira (dogs) of Mallanna and establishing their role as officiating mediators between Mallanna and kurumas. This annual cyclical ritual enactment is crucial to express their ‘ethnic identity’ as community which itself serves as a strategy to claim their statuses in an intercultural situation. The voice of identity is so vividly pronounced during the ritual sequence both by word and deed that it appears as if their claiming of ‘status’ through overt anti-structural overtones is a conscious effort to establish the community’s solidarity in the wake of strong caste hierarchies.
Mallanna, the agriculturalist turned pastoralist during his exploits, marries five girls belonging to different castes ranging from Brahmins to gollas. The myth is divided into five parts known as *pancha khandas*. Each *khanda* is dedicated to an episode of marriage of Mallanna to one of the five brides, namely, Balija Medallamma *alias* Brahramamba Devi, Kapula Padmakshi Devi, Bapana Ratnangi Golla Kethamma, and Kshatriya Domanta Kanya. The myth, being a multi-plot structure, can be performed independently or as a whole. The plot structure of Western drama is five partite: (1) Interdiction or Exposition (2) Progression or Rise (3) Climax (4) Return or Fall (5) Catastrophe (Freytag 1968:121).

Diagram-II: Western Drama Plot Structures

![Diagram](image-url)

This structure presupposes unilinear progression that comes perhaps, from the Western worldview and epistemology, which intrinsically support the concept of *relativism* associated with temporality. The Indian worldview is construed on cyclical phenomena of temporality wherein the pentapartite plot structure is negated and exposition and catastrophe, i.e., the beginning and the end of the story lines blend and merge leaving scope for the emergence of multi-plot structures. One episode transcends to the other and creates a meaningful tale to the audience. At the same time it also gives scope for the performers to break the text into cognisable units and perform as episodes. All this is due to smooth curving of the tale.
The story is so developed that one marriage of Mallanna leads to the other marriage as shown in the above diagram. Therefore, the graph of the plot structure does not form straight lines rising from lower to higher levels, but forms in smooth curvatures. Mallanna in various guises performs different tasks and poses diverse challenges to brides’ parties and wins over the brides at the end of each episode. The narrative is full of humour and satire and hence attracts the internal audience.

This being the case, the performers manipulate the duration of each unit of performance both in vertical and linear temporality by transiting between realms of performance text and mental text with the oguu katha as axis. With the result, the continuity of performance is achieved not solely by the text or the probable duration of rendering the text (time). Both text and time are independent entities but become relatable only by the performance. The performers can shift back and forth in the text in narrating the units of the text.

The following diagram represents the structural dynamics of the text of Mallanna Katha in the performance context.
Diagram-IV: Structural Dynamics of the Performance Texts:

As shown in the above diagram, X-axis represents duration of the performance (time) and Y-axis represents performance in the ritual context. In general, the performance has two zones. The upper zone can be termed as “story realm (SR) of the performance and the lower zone can be viewed as “teller realm” (TR). These spaces are created during performance by the performer, with the help of three kinds of texts. The upper zone of story realm is built with the help of _oggu katha_ text (T) and performance text (PT). The lower zone is constructed with the help of _oggu katha_ text (T) and Mnemonic text (mental text) (MT). The _mallanna katha_ when performed oscillates between these zones and the continuity of narrative do not depend upon the text alone as it is otherwise the case with the main stream theatre wherein the text of the plays alone dominates in
creating continuity of the play. The mallanna katha text (T) is basically a traditional text found only in oral composition. The performers by and large memorise their texts and could render randomly any portion of the text in the performance context. The nature of performance text is such that it violates sequential rendition. In other words, performance text takes liberty in rendition and more sensitive to context than to the text.

The structure of the context of the performance of the present study focuses the marriage of Mallanna with Balija Medalamma alias Brahmaramba Devi. The actual performance starts not with narration (i.e. text), but with preparation of ritual event (i.e. marriage) of the performance. This understanding is crucial because the structure of context begins not with the interpersonal relationship between performer-audiences but with performer with his expected audience, i.e., audience in ‘absentia’. As a part of preparation, the family members (all male members) of the performers (Oggukatha) create an illusionary fort with mud walls of four inch size in height and breadth with four major cross roads and at the centre, a structure symbolically representing the palace where Medalamma is kept as captive by a raksasa (demon) namely Veera Seshala. The mud figurine of Veera Seshala is also placed towards north of the illusionary fort as one whose eyes are wide opened as if he is guarding the fort. Within the fort walls, foursquare boxes representing the habitat plan within the fort is drawn and were filled with patterned lines and smeared with colours. This they term it as patam or patnam. The boxes are drawn as highly stratified structures and the whole processes of colouring and preparations of the setting itself take more than six hours before the actual performance. The male members of the family who are performing the role of officiating priests observe certain austerities before commencing the ritual drawing (patam). This indicates their position as that of ‘separation’ and there by acclaim a status to mediate between gods and the devotees. Once the ritual performance begins they get into liminality, a position which points out ‘between and betwixt’ status, through ritual possessions and negate the existing social order and hierarchies. This is symbolically manifested in the physical destruction of the spaces in patam and also the patam itself. The following diagram represents the patam.
During the narration, the story (katha) of Mallanna is recited which actually do not correspond to the actual event of marriage of Mallanna with Balija Medalamma or Braharamba Devi. The episodes of strong fort, Veera Seshala, the raksasa and redeeming Medalamma are told in rapid succession. The performers resorted to ‘prose’ than ‘poetic’ mode while narrating the basic story sequence. Then the audience, at the behest of the performers, enact the destruction of the fort, especially the ‘patam’. Even among the audience, the ‘inner audience’ or the conventional audience are the foremost to participate in the ritual enactment and it is they who get possessed by the spirits when
the narration gets intermittent break due to ritual events. The oggus help them to come back to normalcy. Usually when the ‘insider’ gets possessed, he/she reveals oracles, which are another important aspect of the ritual, and this perpetuates faith on the performers and thereby the performance tradition itself.

The structure of the context thus starts with the presence of expected audience, i.e., the audience ‘in absentia’ to the presence of real audience. Thus, the audience continuum here makes the performance to allow generic continuum as a convenient strategy to the performers to adopt for expressing ethnic identity as well as solidarity of the groups. The systematic drawings representing highly stratified but often abstract in context reveal the worldview of the performers and their audience. The destruction of patam at the end of the performance with goat sacrifice projects their anti-structural overtones at least in their ‘made belief’ situation to climb up in the social hierarchy. The marriage with Brahmin, Kapu and Kshatriya girl further substantiates verbally this phenomenon. Then creating structures and subverting structures through ritual enactments in the structure of the context forms the central and focal theme of the performance to establish their ‘ethnic identity’ in an inter cultural situation.

Thus, dualism persists throughout the narrative of Mallanna Katha in the form of deep structure and surface manifestation; content plane and expression plane; and signified and signifier and yet blend and clash to form the discourse in negotiating identities of the community which own the caste myth.

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References


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