

TRIBAL MAHABARATA IN A.P.

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In the Indian cosmic world, Nature i.e. wild animals and forest are ruled by the celestial forest kings, whereas, the culture i.e. production is represented by Pandava kings, water by jalakanyas.

The historical and archeological setting

During 11-14th centuries, the Matsya dynasty ruled the rural and tribal areas of Visakha dist in Northern part of A.P., having their capital at Vaddadi (the beginning of Odhra Desa i.e. Odisha). Machkund, Matsyagundam are pilgrim centers and Matsyagadda is the major river in Matsyadesa. Visakha hill tracts receive highest rain fall in A.P. The Endrikaparvatam i.e the crab hill is one of the highest peaks where from many streams flow. Fish, crab, frog, pond skater and fern are the manifestations of water deities.

Place names with their adjectives indicate one or other type of water source. The Matsyadevata (*fish goddess*) kept her children, hunted by the snakes in the protection of Matsya lingeswara and left to Matsya parvatam in Gammeli of Gangarajumadugula mandal. Sivaratri is celebrated for Matsya lingeswara with abishekams. The Punyagiri hill in the eastern part of the hill tract near Srungavarapukota is called as Virata Parvatha. Sivaratri is celebrated here as “Ganga panduga”. Nobody recollects the stalapurana of tribes which discloses the roots of our culture and efforts of our ancestors in integrating all the walks of people residing in different habitats in our continent and the lesson that the fight is inevitable between the prey and predators in the nature and culture as well.

Exploitation by market forces

The tribal identify themselves as Pandavas in exile and celebrate seven days festival, Nandipanduga, when they resume cultivation in the fallow lands. There are big statues of Pandavas in the southern part of the hill tract in Lambasingi forest area. Further deep in the forests of Gudem, one Srikrishna temple was erected by Yadava rulers of Vajragada. Vajragada is nearby present Narsipatnam town. The song in Nandipanduga is accompanied by 7 days ritual, concludes that Pandavas are yet to succeed in checking the exploitation of Kauravas of lowland. The popular adage “Pancha Pandavula Panta – Duryodhanudi Vanta” (the harvest of Pandavas going to the kitchen of Kauravas) explains their anguish.

Tribal revots: Golugonda – Gudem fituris

The principalities in these hill tracts Golugonda, Vaddadimadugula, Kurupam etc related and loyal to the rulers of Nandapuram, the ancient kingdom in the Eastern Ghats, (*later estate of Jeypore*). Chandragupta Vikramaditya Ujjain gave his daughter Prabhavathi to Vakataka kings, who are related to Nandapura rulers.

Ever since the British supported the claim of Vijayanagaram Samstanam in the east coast, that these principalities were ceded to them by Moghul emperor Aurangzeb, these rulers had been revolting, forcing the British to directly enter into agreement with them. As one of such Golugonda ruler failed to pay the peshkush, British confiscated the principality. This action was opposed by the ruler and his tribal chiefs (*muttadars*) in Chintapally and Gudem forest areas, who started rebellion since 1830 in Visakha district. After Golugonda fituri was suppressed, the British entered into agreement with local tribal chiefs i.e. muttadars replacing the rebels, rewarding the loyals. Such actions intensified unrest which continued till the legendary hero Alluri Seetaramaraju who led the movement in its final stage was encountered in 1924. These uprising are known as Golugonda area Gudem fituris.

Invoking the tradition – instilling confidence

The tribes have to fight on two fronts i.e. 1) with the mischievous low land Kauravas and 2) the alien administrative system introduced by British based on the written culture of records – decrees. Interestingly according to the ballet and ritual in Nandi panduga celebrated by tribes, Pandavas i.e. the tribes, get the support of one Kolanna of Pittagada, a territorial constituency of Matsyadesa in lowlands. Pledge him to their stepmother in the lowlands to get seeds etc for their cultivation, get permission to cultivate the land from the rulers through him. But the greedy Kauravas claim the produce through the markets.

David Arnold¹ traced the actions of British administration alienating from their lands, restricting customary rights in the forest apart from the harassment and under payment of wages by the local officials laying the roads into the hill tracts.

He notes that the Dist Collector of Vizagpatnam in 1860 reported that the priests (sivasaris) were roaming around inciting the tribes against British, instilling confidence among them about the return of Pandava kingdom.

Discrimination within the tribes – the conflict

The support of Kolanna who is familiar with the mischievous ways of both the traders and officials is a must for the rest of innocent tribes.

But Kolanna, hailing from the untouchable community, migrated from the lowlands to uplands, though engaged as village servant, is looked down in reality.

Social ideology

But the tribal women recollecting the marriage alliance between the ruling families of uplands(*Desi Rajulu of Nandapur*) and lowlands(*Durgandlu of Vaddadi*) kings, narrate in a song, the differences in their value systems and perceptions (elopement Vs marriage - fine and excommunication Vs hand cuffing, sentencing to jail for punishment) leading to misunderstandings and tragedies. The tribes further visualize the marriage between the untouchable girl, Ganga(*Valmiki*) and the prince Sanjivaraju(*heir of both kingdoms*), against the tribal norms i.e. excommunication to lower caste or the permissive practice of non-tribes keeping the women of the lower caste as 'concubines' to avoid sharing of property for her children. Thus the song envisages the synergy in the genius of both the communities and preaches to come over the weakness, misunderstanding and short comings.

The exposure, the reservations, Christianity

Some of the members of the above community, to get out of the stigma of untouchability and discrimination, have been embracing Christianity. The community is recognized as Valmiki scheduled tribes in 1956 having exposure to outside world is advancing getting lion's share in jobs and also in capturing political power. Now the rest of the tribal communities are nurturing grudge against them and demanding grading of tribal communities according to the development indicators.

The crisis

Thus Maharabaratha has been a source to draw parallels for tribes and to ventilate their frustration and encounters within and with the civilized world. But the tribes can no more avoid confrontation as there are no more forests to go on exile. The irony is that though they have the support of Constitutional safe guards, they are yet to be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to deal with the state and its systems, officialdom and protection from the advancing communities among them.

Imposing high culture-

While comparing the advantages in Indian peninsula with other continents, it is well said that "African ideologists lack the cultural resources which their Asian counterparts find in the religion of High Cultures of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islamism."² Now the Hindu evangelists are imposing high culture, instead of adopting it to local situations.

The vacuum

Once upon a time, our hermitages and Universities (Gurukuls) used to be in the forest. Jangams(*saivate priests for subaltern communities*) Dasaries (*vaishnavite priests*) folk artists etc,

used to travel between lowlands and uplands, adopt the stories of epics in tune with the regional and political realities. Now these roaming cultural ambassadors have vanished as their traditional livelihoods are no more respectable and sustainable in changing times. So there is stagnation in propagating and moulding the epics to current situations.

The main stream ignoring little tradition

The modern Swamijis and Gurus are city based and least interested in these folk stories as their audience belong to advanced sections of the society. The widening cultural gap coupled with growing economic disparities is resulting in unrest, violence all over the hill tracts of India.

Now days, the festival of Modamma, the eldest sister of Durgandlu, is celebrated during the Dasara festival in Paderu the administrative headquarters of Visakha tribal areas, with mainstream puja. Nobody knows the story of Ganga, the daughter in law of Modamma, whose foot print sculpture is just a few hundred meters away. While tribals still worship Pandavas, Swamijis are interested in supporting the construction of Rama temples. While tribals have their own music and dance, Bhajans are encouraged and propagated.

Mahabharata story of tribes

A gruel king (*Ambatula raj*) has rice wife(*Annamula devi*). She has a child Kolanna while she was virgin. One day while working in the field, the gruel king fell into nap. At that time Siva and Parvati are flying the sky. Parvati saw a beautiful pond. Requested Siva to get down. When they were enjoying in the bush of grass, gruel king mistaken for the movement of wild animal in the grass. He shot at it. Disturbed Parvati, cursed that shooter will go on exile leaving his wife to the forest. Gruel king went to the forest, started living with a tribal girl (*Aasiveyula papa*). Meanwhile two sister Gowramma and Nandamma on a joy ride went to the hills. Gowramma unable to go up, dropped in the middle.. Nandamma pleased by the hospitality of gruel king, proposed to marry him. The gruel king submitted that he cannot afford to maintain a girl for lowlands. She consoled him suggesting worship her who chose to reside in the ant hill. Meanwhile his tribal wife gave birth to Pandavas. Kolanna also joined them.

Pandavas are unable to get along with food gathering. So they pledged Kolanna to their step mother (*Anamula devi*) in the lowlands and borrowed seeds. Sent Kolanna to obtain the permission to the cultivate lands. But shrewd Dhuryodhana claimed the harvest brought into the market by Pandavas.

In the ritual, tribes worship ant hill, prepare a bullock with the soil, another one with tubers and take them to the village. Enact the roles of Pandavas and remove the implants put up by jealous neighbors through sorcery. Thus they were able to sort out the internal problem, but unable to get reasonable price in the market and also titles for their land under their possession, restoration of alienated land, recognition of their uses in the forest from the government and most important is the inclusion of knowledge on governance and lessons on local tribal heritage in the school syllabus.

Post script

After the Gudem fituri is suppressed, the muttadars with the protection of British emboldened to exploit the tribes extracting bonded labor, imposing heavy fines in the customary councils with the support of the local agents of Gurus (*religious leaders*), who became active in the sanskritisation movements.

Tribals joined the Gandhian and anti land lord (*Jamindari, Muttadari*) movements. They gathered in Madugula in 1935 under the leadership of Mandeswara sarma , who named his organization as Andhra Sramika Dharma Rajyasabha (Andhra laborers justice forum) with the slogan “minumuluri ghat road should be laid – the muttadari system should be abolished” the ghat road connecting tribal areas with low lands should be laid and extracting free labor for the loan interest should be done away with.

Thus the tribes wanted exposure with the outside world for their awakening. The muttadari system was abolished in 1969, raitwari settlements was introduced the landlord communities ie ruling caste people got titles to vast extent of lands. The Integrated Tribal Development Agencies headed by Indian Administrative Service Officers were formed in the administrative headquarters. A revenue division was formed exclusively for the Visakha tribal area.

But the unrest intensified. The present Maoist movement known as people’s war group in 1987 intensified its activities in these areas. The habitations of some tribes in Gudem area were burnt by the police and forest departments on allegation that they are sheltering the naxalite leaders and intensifying shifting cultivation. Tribal student movement also picked up as their front organization during this time.

Sivaramakrishna during his doctoral research collected the above tribal stories with the support of Sridharji, the founder of Vanavasi Kalyanaashram. NGO Sakti started by him in the adjacent East Godavari district was successful in stopping the felling of forest by Godavari Plywood factory in Gudem area. Following Sakti, Samata another NGO was successful in closing the mining operations of one Birla company in the Araku valley through PIL. As the

Court order in Samatha case allowed mining by government corporations, Sakti challenged the agreements entered into by the corporations with the private companies.

The High Court of Andhra Pradesh directed to keep these agreements on hold. The petition challenging the orders allowing private company is about to be heard by the Court.

Opposing mining of bauxite has becoming railing point for the Maoist groups. The political parties are also forced to join the chorus. Heavy deployments of police force, frequent killings by these groups are regularly reported from these areas. The rape of tribal women by police force in one Vakapalli village has attracted the headlines of newspapers.

Sakti trained Thimsa, a network of tribal NGOs in the area to prepare traditional customary boundary maps of 217 habitations in 29 panchyats for recognition under recognition forest rights act in spite of District Collector instructions, the ITDA is not interested to initiate the process.

An NGO Girijana vikasa in gudem impeded in the appeals filed by forest department against the titles issued to tribes in forests whose final reserve notifications were not complete.

Sakti published songs of Nandipanduga and Modamma, collecting the photographs with the help of local NGOs. But the educated tribes under the influence of Hindu evangelists groups are not interested in propagating them. Thus the mainstream communities are blind to the heritage of tribes and also in supporting their struggles for the rights.

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In the Eastern Ghats the function of religion may be said to have been two-fold. Firstly it expressed the hillmen's dissatisfaction with their subjugation and offered a means by which they hoped for deliverance from oppression. Secondly, it gave them a new courage, a heightened sense of their common identity as hillmen; it forged a new solidarity that enabled them to fight their materially more powerful opponents.

One can see both these functions in the 1886 rising in Gudem. At the end of 1885 Potukuri Maladu, a Konda Dora Priest (or Sivasari) and cultivator, was visted by Salabi Bodadu, a Sivasari from a neighbouring Mutta. Bodadu said that god had appeared to him and assured him that the hill people would once again rule their country and that they would be successful if they rose in a fituri against the government. Bodadu also told Maladu that he had met the Pandavas in a jungle: they foretold success for the revolt and, as a token, gave him a cane, which he showed to Maladu. Maladu consulted Murla Balayya, the munsif of Sadiki village and a Bagata, who gave his approval to a fituri. The cane was placed in Maladu's hut and worshipped.

According to the Agent (District Collector), Bodadu had been wandering about the hills from village to village 'like a man possessed' for the past two years, making 'certain mad prophecies' and saying that the gods favoured a fituri. With the help of Potukuri Maladu, he gathered a band of about twenty Sivasaris and other Konda Doras and in January 1886 they traveled through the hills of Padwa and Madugula, visiting shrines and seeking divine approval for a fituri. Among the sites

visited was Matsya Gundam, a rock-pool on the sacred Macheru River near Paderu. On their return they began to make preparations for the rising.

At this point two new characters entered the drama. One was Jani Kakari, a Konda Dora and former landholder from just below the ghats, whose involvement in the futuri will be looked at more closely later. The other was Rajanna Annatayya, a Telugu from Kasimkot in the plains. A 'regular rolling stone', he had been a teacher and police constable (until his dismissal in 1872); he then drifted to Gudem Patavadi where he taught the sons of mokasadar. Perhaps, as with many such leaders, it was lack of worldly success, which turned Anantayya towards millennial beliefs. He joined the discontented hillmen at sadiki claiming that he was Hanuman and would lead a Rama Dandu (Rama's Army) against the British. One of the young villagers, Surla Ramanna, partly through the suggestion of his name, was similarly taken up as an incarnation of Rama. As befitted deities, 'regular worship was paid to them', and hillmen from neighbouring villages came to make obeisance to them and perform Pujas in their honour. When 'Sri Rama' spoke, he said that the days of the British were over and that the muttadars would regain their ancient authority.

P.124-125. Jani Kakari held land in Pesarada, a mokhasa village at the foot of the ghat, but in 1878 lands that he and his co-sharers in the mokhasa claimed as theirs were adjudged by the Principal Assistant Collector to belong to the neighbouring ryotwari village of Pallapunagandhorapalem. Shortly after this decision the Survey Department demarcated the boundary between the two villages in such a way as to deprive Kakari of still more of what he thought to be his land. Behind both these misfortunes he saw the hand of his rival, Yella Venkaiah, an influential ryot of Pallapunagandhorapalem, who also had Kakari imprisoned for fifteen days for reaping the crop he had sown in a disputed field. Too poor to take his grievance to the courts and feeling, besides, that his enemy and the bureaucracy were conspiring against him, Kakari decided to avenge himself by murdering Venkaiah. At the end of May 1886 he went to Sadiki where he had relatives and knew that discontent was brewing. He promised to join the futuri if the hillmen would first help him against Venkaiah. This was agreed, sacrifices were made for the success of the expedition, and on 3 June Kakari and six men from Sadiki attacked Venkaiah's house. They set it on fire and killed one of the servants, but failed to murder Venkaiah, who by the light of his blazing house recognized Kakari. For the latter there could now be no turning back. Two weeks later he led the raid on Gudem police station and the government bungalow at Chintapalle.

P.111. In years of poor harvest there was little for the hillman to eat or the sahuakar to distract. In bountiful years the sahuakars descended at harvest time, like a plague of locusts, taking the grain from the threshing-floor and the tamarinds from the trees. For the hillman 'good years' and 'bad years' were almost equally bad.

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