

THE SOCIAL MARGINALIZATION OF DEPRESSED CASTE WOMEN

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY ON SOCIAL ISSUES OF TOM-TOM BEATER CASTE WOMEN

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Abstract

Educated and economically affluent youths of depressed caste communities in Sri Lanka have been engaging in several strategic actions to avoid communal aspects of their caste identity so that they tend to set apart them from the caste-based marginalization. However, their strategies to refrain from material social facts of their group identity are not seemed to be efficient to protect their women from such marginalization, instead these tendencies have caused further difficulties for women in the community structure. This ethnographical study is based on selected Tom-tom beater communities in Batticaloa district, Sri Lanka. Overall objective of the study is to describe social issues of women of tom-tom beater caste women due to the strategic actions of men of the caste group. The study is mostly based on qualitative information collected through ethnographical field work. The study found that the strategic actions of youth are based on refraining from two material social facts of their caste identity. To evade caste obligation, firstly, they coercively prevent their caste men to play drum in public and religious ceremonies. This radical action economically affects women of those families that relies on drum beating for income and, as a result, makes them as women headed households. Secondly, they try to change their non-agamic Hindu rituals into Agamic ones. This study draws the conclusion that tendencies of Tom-tom beater caste men for upward status mobility in a closed stratified social system generate severe social issues and life challenges for women of this caste.

Keywords: *Caste identity, Marginalization, Strategy for escaping women and social issues.*

1.0.Introduction

Though the explicit, traditional discriminatory practices are almost absent in Sri Lanka, most of the lower castes have been engaging in deliberate attempts of strategic use of actions in order to escape from the subtle forms of marginalization that rooted in their traditionally attached

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lowest identity. Unlike Dalit caste groups in India, lower caste groups in Sri Lanka don't tend to make their identity visible to others. Identity-based group solidarity is comprehensively entertained by higher castes of India and Sri Lanka for political and social welfare purposes. The purpose is same for Indian Dalit communities, since they also consolidate their group solidarity on identity basis to achieve their political, social and economic gains. But in Sri Lanka, such kind of consolidation of identity-based group solidarity is almost missing. In eastern part of Sri Lanka like some other parts as identified in recent studies, there has been a strong tendency among Tamil lower castes to escape from their group identity. It is apparent that educated and economically affluent youths of depressed caste communities in Sri Lanka have been engaging in a struggle to escape from their caste-based identities in order to escape from caste-based marginalization. They have been engaging in several strategic actions to evade communal aspects of their caste identity so that they tend to set apart them from depressed category of caste-based stratification.

2.0. Statement of the Problem

It is apparent that lower caste groups in south Asian region have been engaging in the struggle of escaping from marginalization, even though there have been substantial legal provisions for equality and protection from communal violence. In case of Sri Lanka, overt varieties of caste-based violence are explicitly absent, but there are definite forms of subtle marginalization in practice that very much impervious to their class-wise status amelioration. Tamil outcaste communities in Eastern Sri Lanka have been entangled in the process of annihilation of their caste-based identity to refrain from subtle marginalization. They are undertaking several strategic actions to eradicate their identity-based structural violence while facing severe barriers to do so. However, their strategies to refrain from material social facts of their group identity are not seemed to be efficient to benefit women of their own caste in this regard and not to protect women of the communities from marginalization either, instead these tendencies have caused further difficulties for women of the community experiencing the identity-based marginalization in day-to-day life. This ethnographical study is based its focus on selected tom-tom beater caste communities in Batticaloa district.

3.0.Objectives

Overall objective of the study is to describe the social issues of women of the tom-tom beater caste women due to the strategic actions of men within the caste group. Specifically, the study aims to

1. describe the strategic actions of Tom-tom beater caste men
2. analyze the causes of identity-based marginalization against tom-tom beater caste members and the barriers of strategic action for men
3. to evaluate the impacts of these actions on women from depressed stratum of caste hierarchy.

4.0.Theoretical Basis

The military and state-centered concept of human security shifted its principal notion toward people centered one.² Rethinking the meaning of security during the 1990s created a new security agenda which includes wide range of issues of people including inequality (Sabur, 2003, p. 37) In this way, the concept became more relevant with the idea of positive peace, which is more than absence of war. Positive peace includes the obliteration of structural violence that is deeply embedded in the discriminatory or marginalized practices prevailing in the socio-economic and cultural arenas of a society (Galtung, 1996, p. 2) Such practices are directed towards any kinds of vulnerable categories of human being that their marginalized identity can make them more susceptible to violence. Consequential threats to human security stated in the UNDP's human development report 1999 can be confined to a certain extent within the circle of structural violence. Among seven major threats to human security, community and cultural insecurity³ has its prominent relevance with some forms of caste-based marginalization.

5.0.Methodology

This field study is mostly based on qualitative method and to a lesser extent quantitative method. This study is prominently relied on ethnographical data sources. Primary data was collected by taking up the tools of;

1. In-depth interviews
2. Focused group discussions

² Human Development Report 1994, p. 24

³ Human Development Report 1999, p.4

3. Observation
4. Case histories.

Secondary data was collected from official documents of relevant authorities, departments and previous studies of published materials in various books, magazines and newspapers. Several community-based organizations and institutions were also visited to gather further secondary information. Research area is confined to four villages of Batticaloa district; Kaluthavalai, Arayampathi, Punnaikulam and Pilalivembhu. Selection of these villages was made through the purposive and snow-ball sampling methods.

6.0. Brief outlook on research area caste composition

In case of dominant caste ranking, there is a considerable distinction in Tamil caste hierarchy of northern region and eastern region. In northern Sri Lanka, Brahman (temple priest) and Saiva Kurukkal (non-Brahman temple priest) occupied the dominant rank and Vellalar (Land holder and farmer) claims the rank next to them in the hierarchy. In this ranking, Paraiyar was placed in lowest among all other castes (David, 1974, p. 47). In eastern part of the country, three upper castes, namely, Mukkuvar, Vellalar and Saivakurukkal are in dominant rank. Among the twelve castes of eastern region, Paraiyar was given last rank in the hierarchical ladder (McGilvray, 2011, pp. 40-41). Some famous Paraiyar Settlements in Batticaloa of eastern Sri Lanka are taken as focal points for this study.

Kaluthavalai is situated in Manmunai North Eruvil Pattu D.S. division and it comprise of two major castes; Mukkuvar and Paraiyar. Comparatively, Kaluthavalai Paraiyar caste members are not only numerically but in the level of education and economy, higher than other three village Paraiyar caste members. There are 618 members of 110 families concentrated in a particular GN division; Kaluthavalai-4.

Arayampathy is in Manmunai Pattu D.S. division which is comprised of several castes, but majority is Karaiyar. Interesting case is that there is a place called “Paraiyar Vaddai” (circle of Paraiyar caste members). This place was separately allocated for Paraiyar caste, but nowadays there are only two particular caste members are living here. Other members of Paraiyar caste sold their land to other caste members and migrated to sub-urban areas. But the Hindu temple is still under the administrative control and maintenance of the Paraiyar caste.

Punnaikulam and Pilalivembhu are two villages confined within Vellaveli GN division of Porativu Pattu D.S. division. Punnaikulam is almost occupied by Paraiyar caste. 12 out of 67 families are from other castes, rests of them are Paraiyar caste families. In Pilalivembhu, very few Paraiyar caste members are living, only 7 families out of 42 households. Some Traditional types of marginalization are still apparent in Pilalivembhu.

7.0.Findings

7.1. Strategies to escaping caste-based marginalization

Specifically demarcated territory and traditionally determined occupation are two major factors that make Tom-tom beater caste youths more susceptible to subtle forms of marginalization. Therefore, men of this caste group pursue two strategies to escape from marginalization on territorial base. These two strategies are to escape from their physical territory in order to lose their caste identity. Firstly, they try to migrate from their territory specifically allocated for them to settle down in places situated very far from their native niche, particularly in Urban and sub-urban areas where their caste identity is hardly recognized. Secondly, they attempt to marry higher caste women living in remote places by concealing their real caste information.

Tom-tom beater caste youths have also been engaging in an attempt to escape from their lower caste identity based on caste-based obligation. Educated youths of this caste have affianced in a radical strategy to annihilate their caste obligation. In 1995, there was a radical youth movement among Kaluthavalai tom-tom beater caste men to completely ban their traditional drum beating and to prevent their caste men to serve other high castes on traditional caste service basis. They destroyed drums in their temples and strictly ordered to those who playing drum in funerals to give-up the occupation. Same trend was followed by Arayampathy tom-tom beater caste men. Punnaikulam tom-tom beater caste men were compelled to refrain from drum beating in their own temples and temples of high castes by Kaluthavalai tom-tom beater caste men, since they have their close relatives over there.

Tendency for eradicating drum beating was also inadvertently exacerbated by the participation of high caste members in tom-tom beater caste temples. Increased attraction towards Hindu non-Agamic worship pattern, not exclusively, but specially practiced by lower castes, brought about participation of high caste people in temples of lower caste people. This change is seen by tom-tom beater caste men that high caste members recognize them as equal, not lowest

people. This perception led tom-tom beater caste men to eradicate their specific caste aspects like drum beating from their temples and to change the worship pattern as Agamic one. It was also the case in India as well where elites of lower castes pursued Sanskritization to make status equality (Roberts, 1995, p. 180). This is observable in all three villages Kaluthavalai, Punnaikulam, and Arayampathy. In Arayampathy, even though they migrated from the territory, they continue to have a link with temples. Almost all members evacuated the territory specially allocated for them, but they are not willing to hand over the temple's administration to any others.

7.2.Barriers for Strategic Actions

Escaping from the territory is not an easy task for most of the tom-tom beater caste members. For several reasons, they encounter barriers in successfully furnishing this strategic action. Firstly, most of this caste people are economically poor and are unable to purchase the land in outside. Secondly, some members have sensitive attachment to the territory. Therefore, they are not betrothed to leave their traditional land. Thirdly, some of them are willing to lose their caste identity, but they are not in a position to remove their village identity. In case of Kaluthavalai, considerable numbers of this caste are willing to show them as a resident of Kaluthavalai, since the village is somehow popular in the division.

Strategic marriage is a severe attempt among the youths of particular caste and there is a strong tendency for marrying high caste women among this caste youths. But it is not successful either, because they were identified as a member of lower caste by their bride's relatives few months after marriage. Therefore, these men have been found guilty of cheating that they lied to their women about their caste. Few cases ended up with divorce and in few cases, the caste men along with his high caste wife returned to his previous habitat.

The strategic attempts further found two major disturbances in annihilating the caste-based obligations; drum beating. Firstly, some tom-tom beater caste members wish to keep drum beating for their economic gains and for the sake of its traditional value. They are confronting with the radical youths. This brings about intra-caste conflict. Secondly, other caste members in this area compel them to engage in drum beating and dancing since it is considered as a part of Tamil national culture. Latter one caused to the counter argument of Paraiyar caste with others.

7.3.Confrontational reflections on Strategic actions

Obstacles to successfully escape from their territorial base by settling down or marrying an upper caste woman in remote places lead to the radical youths of tom-tom beater caste to annihilate the material base of their group identity which embeds in their caste obligation; drum beating. At this juncture, it is necessary to evaluate the confrontational reflections on strategic action of preventing tom-tom beater caste men to engaging in their traditional occupation. Generally, performing arts like music, dance and acting were often seen as socially degraded in Tamil regions since these arts were preoccupied by low level people in Tamil stratified social system (Thiruchandran, 1997, p. 148). Traditional caste occupation of tom-tom beater caste is beating drum and dancing in certain public occasions is one of the performing arts. It could not be the one and only reason that tom-tom beater caste men perform drumming at funeral homes for their lowest status, because they also do that in temple ceremonies and rituals and even marriages and puberty ceremonies. Nonetheless they performed their traditional art in ceremonial, ritual and funeral occasions; they were given last position in the caste hierarchy of Tamil Society.

It was argued that caste system and its traditional occupational patterns can be considered as obsolete for several reasons. Main reason is that the relevance of caste occupations with their traditionally determined stakeholder of those occupations is hardly found (Quigley, 1994, p. 31). It is not only the scenario in which some castes have relinquished their traditional occupations, but there are some castes performing other castes' occupations. Income generation (economy) and nationalistic significance (Political) are two major imperatives which were motivated castes to take over other castes' duties after independence in South Asia. In case of performing arts, both imperatives have played a critical role in drawing other castes to involve into a particular caste occupation. Specifically in drumming, in Sinhala society of Sri Lanka, upper castes have taken over the duty of drumming which was the occupation of one of the lower caste; Berawa, in Kandy Perehara, since "Bera" was seen as having nationalistic importance of Sinhala tradition (Reed, 2009).

But the case is vice-versa in Tamil Society in Sri Lanka. When nationalistic significance has been attached to the duty of drumming, no one upper caste is ready to take over the "Parai". Even the particular part of the drummer caste is showing resistance to perform drumming anymore. Few of the tom-tom beater caste members wish to follow drumming for their income.

Very little of the caste members advocate the notion of traditional value attached to the drumming. Educated youths of tom-tom beater caste who have already been in radical action to destroy drums are contrary with those who have attached the nationalistic value and traditional value to “Parai”. Attachment of traditional value to “Parai” and the aspiration for keep on performing drumming based on the notion of traditional value caused not only the resentment of radical mass of Paraiyar, but also turned out the strategic actions of radical elites into violent ones and directed towards their own caste men.

7.4. Disproportionate disadvantage of the intentional strategies of men on women of tom-tom beater caste.

The study found that the strategic actions of men are based on refraining from two material social facts of their caste identity; Traditional caste obligation and specifically allocated locality.

To evade caste obligation, firstly, they coercively prevent their caste men to play drum in public and religious ceremonies. This radical action economically affects women of those families that relies on drum beating for income and, as a result, makes them as women headed households. Youths, specifically men, of this particular caste community have been engaging in radical actions to prevent their caste men to play their traditional drum in temple and funerals which is the traditional caste occupation of Tom-tom beaters. Drum beating, though it's their traditional caste occupation it is an income generating option for some families, never be the task of women in Tom-tom beater community. However, preventing men to perform drum in public and religious ceremonies economically affects women of those families that relies on drum beating for income and, as a result, makes them as women headed households.

Secondly, they try to change their non-agamic Hindu rituals into Agamic ones. This Sanskritization tendency reduce the importance and the participation of women in ritual performance since agamic Hindu rituals resist women's involvement in rituals while non-agamic rituals allow women to play prominent roles in ritual performance. preventing their active participation in religious arena in turn affect their significance in public sphere in the communities so that they are more restricted within their houses.

To escape from physical territory, they follow two tactful actions. Firstly, men tend to marry high caste women living in remote areas by concealing their depressed caste identity. This

exogamous tendency of men let many of this caste women unmarried and also causes late marriages and remarriages in the community, since it is impossible for tom-tom beater caste women to marry high caste men in the society.

Secondly affluent male household heads tend to migrate with their families to urban and sub-urban areas. In the new social environment, migrated women of this caste are restricted highly within the domestic spheres and they enormously lose community participation and social benefits since they could not get into the membership of CBOs to articulate their specific interests. Social relationship of tom-tom beater women with members of other castes are being regulated by mem of their caste. For certain reasons, tom-tom beater caste men began to control their caste women's relationship with outsiders. Tom-tom beater caste women, during colonial and pre independent period, were compelled to serve as prostitutes for high caste men. When tom-tom beaters along with other depressed caste people waged a struggle not to serve the high caste and refrain from traditional caste services until the high castes give them equal opportunities in certain social arenas like temple entry, they wanted to restrict any sort of interactions with high caste people.

In that juncture, they highly concerned about preventing their caste women engaging in clandestine relationship with high caste men. Even today, Tom-tom beater men perceived that educated and employed women of their caste are more conducive than other women to be abused through such relationships by high caste men, because they understood that high caste men are not ready to marry depressed caste women due to their family and community barriers related with inter caste interaction that still strongly persisting particularly in marriage. While engaging in strategic actions, tom-tom beater caste men intend that such unwanted incidents will make stigma on their status amelioration and ascertain their caste identity. Therefore, these men began to control their caste women's relationship with others. Getting on with the restricted relationship with others, it is quite difficult for migrated women to get on with new heterogeneous community. Even young women hate to communicate with other caste men or people, since they or their women relatives have bitter experiences in romantic relationship or marriage engagement with other caste men or with their family members as they denied marrying them only for the depressed caste status.

8. Conclusion

This study draws the conclusion that tendencies of Tom-tom beater caste men for upward status mobility in a closed stratified social system generate severe social issues and life challenges for women of this caste. These tactful ways of actions are individualistic and not shared by the community as a whole. These are not even the communal actions directed on commonly articulated interests of the particular groups. It is the men who educated, employed and economically affluent resort to evade their caste identity to avoid status marginalization. The study urges concerns to be given towards the socio-economic empowerment of these women with the concentration of intra caste gender equality and inter-caste social harmony.

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