

## **Deconstructing the Caste Hegemony: Lambada<sup>i</sup> Oral Literature**

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### **1. Introduction**

Indian society is very carefully and dexterously stratified on the basis of castes and sects. This carefulness and dexterity are used not only to divide the society into thousands of sections but also to protect and preserve this system for ages, banning and barring mobility and interaction between castes. Each caste has a caste lower than itself in hierarchy. Even the most downtrodden and discriminated against section like “untouchables” are divided sharply among themselves according to their castes and practice untouchability against one another. Subservience to one caste and subjugating another caste will put each caste’s agenda, position and attitude in tact by making it rigid in its hierarchical behaviour.

In a country where one’s self-respect, especially that of lower castes and isolated communities, is constantly affected and existence always threatened, one needs a system which will function as an emotional channel to give vent to the trauma that the marginalised people suffer in an oppressive society. They have to dismantle the degradation, at least in their mind or among themselves and boost their morale. It could be by looking back at the past, quite often an imagined past and looking hopefully at the future. This is when the construction of history steps into the picture. This construction of history quite often takes the form of origin stories of different castes and communities. Each caste in India has an origin story and a dependent caste to narrate it. One can recollect the Vedas which are oral, called *apaurusheyas*, those not written by men, which in a way construct a colonial story that is the invasion and colonisation by Aryans. The defeated communities which have become lower castes or untouchables in some cases write their stories or their dreams and aspirations in the

form of caste puranas which quite often write the histories of origin overlooked or misrepresented by “history”. That is why these oral histories, origin stories in nature, not only write the absent histories but also try to dismantle the hierarchy.

Here, I would like to borrow from a Native Canadian writer Lenore Keeshing Topias, who says, "Stories, you see, are not just entertainment. Stories are power. They reflect the deepest, the most intimate perceptions, relationships and attitudes of a people. Stories show how person, a culture, thinks" (Petroni 121)<sup>ii</sup>. Stories are powerful, indeed. They become much more powerful in the context of colonisation and subjugation. It could be in an attempt to voice protest or build solidarity that words take the form of songs, stories and legends. When such cultures are “illiterate” with no script, these stories become the storehouse of experience, culture, tradition and history. When this story-weaving is done in such cultures, the narratives are modified frequently because of the very fluid nature of oral tradition and also because of the updating done constantly by people intentionally or unintentionally. Fact and fiction, reality and fantasy get merged in order to achieve the purpose intended, whether it is to write back to the oppressive system or to build a support system for the community by providing stories that boost the esteem of the people.

Interestingly, all the castes in India, as mentioned earlier, have origin stories and all of them have at least a touch of fantasy in order to assert the caste’s association or intimacy with gods and goddesses thus proving their eligibility to spiritual domain which has been deprived to them hitherto. Quite often these stories have variations according to the subcastes focussing on the respective castes. Let me take for instance Jamba Purana which traces the origin of two Dalit castes as untouchables. The story goes like this: Shiva and Parvathi have a divine cow Kamadhenu which can feed any number of people. Parvathi invites only gods, goddesses and sages to taste its milk and milk products. An adolescent looks after Kamadhenu. Once he feels like tasting Kamadhenu's milk. When he expresses his desire to Parvathi, she asks him to go and tell this to Kamadhenu. On hearing this desire, Kamadhenu collapses

and dies. All the gods and goddesses eagerly flock for its meat. This boy and Jambavantha start cooking it. When a piece falls down from the vessel, the boy and Jambavantha put it back in the vessel. For this, they are cursed to be born as untouchables on earth. Whether this story has a historical basis or not, it definitely is moulded by the spirit of self-esteem among Dalits. On the other hand, if one believes the story of four varnas taking birth from four body parts of Brahma, which forms the foundation of the caste system in India, this story should also be believed.

Similarly, tribes in India though relegated not into the outskirts like Dalits but into the forests, have their own stories of origin. While some tribes live near villages and as nomads in the villages, they borrow from Hindu religion to some extent while some of the tribal deities and practices are appropriated by Hinduism. In all this, one should not forget the fact that some of these tribes have a history of being rulers of the respective territories. It is in this context that their origin stories write their histories and rewrite their aspiration to get acceptability and respect in society. One such tribe is Lambadas.

Let me give a brief introduction to the Lambada tribe. The total 461 tribes in India constitute 7.76 per cent of the population of India, among which the largest tribe is "Gond". Andhra Pradesh is the traditional home of nearly 33 tribes out of the 461. Of these Lambadas constitute the largest tribe in Andhra Pradesh. The oral traditions, mythology, folk tales, historical evidence partly reveal their past. Unlike literature, history does not ignore or neglect the Lambadas. It tries to interpret the different names of the same nomenclature--Lambada, Banjara and Sugali--with reference to the lifestyle of the Lambadas in the past. The word Banjara is perhaps derived from the Sanskrit *vanachara*, which denotes their nomadic lifestyle in forests in the past. Lambada seems to have derived from the word *Lamban* or length which perhaps refers to their long caravan of bullocks along their migration routes. As another alternative, it is also considered to be a form of *Lavan*, a Sanskrit word for salt, which refers to Lambadas as salt carriers. It is also said that some consider Sugali a corruption of *supari* (betel nut), a

derivation dependent on the belief that the tribe formerly traded largely in the betel nut.

Russell and Hiralal in their book *Tribes and Castes of Central Provinces* state that Banjaras were first mentioned by Asian in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. According to Asian, they were then leading a wandering life, living in tents and letting their cattle out for hire.<sup>iii</sup> Russell and Hiralal say that Banjaras migrated to the Deccan along with the forces of Aurangzeb in 17<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, there are various controversies about the period of migration of Lambadas. In his *Castes and Tribes of North-Western Province and Oudh*, W. Crooke states that the first migration of Banjara in Mohammedan history is Sikander's attack on Dholpur in Rajasthan in 1504 AD. They worked as a sort of unofficial commissariat to the armies of the Mughals and Marathas during the turbulent medieval period, and even to the British army.<sup>iv</sup>

Several historians have tried to write the history of Lambadas by referring to their profession, lifestyle, language, dress code, celebrations so on and so forth.<sup>v</sup> What is of interest to me that I am going to discuss in this paper is how Lambada oral tradition captures all this meticulously and shares it in the community thus passing on the history from generation to generation. It is obvious that Lambadas have not learnt about themselves from history books as they were not literate until a few decades ago. It is "history" that has borrowed from Lambada oral tradition. Even without the interference of history, the Lambada history has stayed intact in the form of oral tradition.

Tribals have always remained isolated from the caste and class-ridden Indian society. In a society of extreme social stratification, tribals are on the last step of the ladder. They do not even come into the caste structure. They stand outside the social system. In order to assert their position in the society, some Indian tribes have woven stories around mythological characters and ideas. Lambada settlements called 'thandas' are located adjacent to main villages in two to three kilometres of distance. Their settlements are built on rocky surface. Their life is full of song and dance. They sing at almost every significant occasion of life like birth, puberty, marriage and death. They dance on every possible happy

occasion including festivals. Marriage is full of song and dance, but it is not devoid of sorrow.

Although there is not much of Lambada representation in literature, their culture itself becomes their literature. Their lifestyle speaks volumes about their history. Orality, which is a part and parcel of their life also plays its role in recording their history and culture. Their oral literature holds a mirror to their evolution from nomadism to pastoralism and ultimately to agriculturalism. It also succeeds in giving reasons and providing backgrounds to every aspect of Lambada life. It connects their building houses on rocky surface to their nomadism. As they had to change settlements from one place to another, in order to avoid the risk of building foundation for their huts, they chose rocky areas that provided natural foundation. Bride's kith and kin lament in the marriage because as nomads and pastorals, the ever-moving Lambadas had very little chance of meeting them among other tribes. A girl married into some other tribe has to forget her parental relations. Thus, marriage was a moment of permanent separation. Marriage and death become synonymous since both demand permanent separation. Thus their customs and traditions unveil the cultural history of the Lambadas.

Oral literature is rightly described as unwritten history. This oral literature not only constructs the history of a section from its own perspective but also deconstructs the history that has been constructed by the other. Consciously or unconsciously this oral literature protests against the strategies of the privileged sections whether it is done with a motive of revolt or not. The social status of Lambadas as a criminal tribe may have led to their poverty or their economic bankruptcy may have led to their social isolation. Whatever it is, they have no power to change their place in the contemporary society. To some extent they may be able to change their economic position, but changing social status in a rigid society like India is next to impossible. In this context their oral literature comes to their rescue. Lambada oral literature which talks about their past most of the time, not only helps them in assuring themselves of their own social status but also proves the efforts of Lambadas to prove themselves in society.

Lambadas in the contemporary society are mostly seen as manual labourers at construction sites. Their oral literature says something contrary to the present situation about the past. According to it, Lambadas' nomadism started from the times of Muslim Invasion. Lambadas helped Prithvi Raj Chauhan in killing Jayachandra who joined hands with Ala-ud-din Khilji, who was fascinated by Prithvi Raj's wife Padmini. After this, the Muslim soldiers haunted Lambadas to massacre them. So, they had to escape into the forests. Their attire, ornaments, especially of women and food habits clearly throw light on their past as nomads. This Literature also says that people who fled into the forests became Lambadas and those remained in the cities were called Marwaris. Marwaris are the ones who have retained the largest share of India's wealth. As if an evidence to this, there is close resemblance between the languages of Marwaris and Lambadas.

In the above stories, we find an attempt to construct the history for they were denied a place in history. This construction also leads to the deconstruction of history where their presence is derogatory and discriminated. In that attempt to deconstruct the history written by the other and construct their own history, some stories are woven around mythological characters and episodes. These stories reveal the longing of the tribals to prove themselves on par with the mainstream society. These stories not only try to convince the other about their superiority but also work as assurance to themselves that they are no less than anybody else. While the society describes them in all possible negative words, it requires a lot of courage and confidence for the tribals to live with self-respect. These stories emerge from that self-respect in expectation of achieving acceptability in the discriminating society.

One of these efforts takes the form of an episode involving mythological characters like Radha and Krishna. According to this story, Mola and Mota were two brothers engaged in the court of legendary Krishna. Krishna, disgusted with material life, distributed his belongings including the crown among his people. Mola and Mota were not present at the time and when they came back, Mola, who was very close to Krishna, asked Krishna as to what his share was. Krishna decided that since Mola is his most

intimate friend, he should be given something invaluable and dearest to Krishna. Krishna gave Radha to Mola. Mola and Radha got married, but they could not have marital life because of Radha's divinity. Both of them, worried about their successors, devised a plan according to which they toured three empires. There, Radha danced and Mola sang. When the kings were impressed and asked what Mola and Radha wanted, they asked for a prince from each empire. Thus they collected three princes from three empires and brought them up as the children of Radha and Mola. In those days, girls were supposed to be married before attaining puberty. A brahmin family had three girls who had attained puberty but were not married. This family was excommunicated by the society. As the family is sleeping under the tree, it comes into contact with the foster children of Mola and Radha and the three girls get married to them. The children born out of these marriages are none other than Lambadas.

This episode clearly shows the attempts of an excommunicated community to enter into the mainstream society. By claiming their origin from Radha and Krishna, probably Lambadas wanted to give a touch of divinity to their origin. Children of two dominant sections of the society--brahmin and kshatriyas--are supposed to be the superior race inheriting the valour and courage of kshatriyas and intellect of brahmins. But the questions about the historical evidence to this episode remain unanswerable. No logic would work as far as this story is concerned except the logic of self-respect. Radha was not Krishna's legal wife and he had no right over her to give her to Mola. This shows that these are only episodes that were built on the endeavour of the Lambadas for self-assurance. It is not only mythological connections but also royal lineage that they take help from to generate confidence among themselves that they are not outcastes but belong to the upper strata of the society.

It is here that the oral tradition of Lambadas becomes crucial and reminds one of Wendy Singer's observation that "History becomes both subject and instrument" (Singer 23). Although Lambadas do not have any clear concept of history but refer to their narratives as stories, it is history that is being reclaimed by Lambadas through their oral tradition.

While history, that is past or their origin becomes the subject of their story telling, history becomes their instrument also. This history, which is partly fiction and partly fact, attempts to barge into the mainstream acceptability by tracing its origin to the mythical figures. On the other hand, their reclaiming or reviving their origin to the Rajput dynasty also writes their stories afresh by dismantling the image of Lambadas in the contemporary society as manual labourers, vendors of petty forest products and worst of all as thieves and criminals. Thus, these stories which make their past as their subject are used as instruments to record and rewrite history, subvert the mainstream notions and bring Lambadas together in solidarity, in celebrating the glorious past that they are deprived of now. Decorating these stories with dance and song keeps them alive, spontaneous and cherished. In all this, one question still haunts us. Are these tales carefully written histories?

These narratives dismantle the Brahmanical standards of the highly stratified society. The above story could be highly fictitious. But, it emphasises mobility among castes in Indian society that existed once upon a time, though with some resistance. On the other hand, except Krishna, the mythical figure, the remaining story might be true. Reading a little more into it, this Krishna could be king Vasudeva that history books refer to. Thus, taking the historical sensibility of Lambada oral tradition as proved above, this may also contain some truth. In any case, the concern of this part of my paper is not to examine how much of these tales is true or false but to discuss how oral tradition becomes a storehouse of community memory and also an endeavour to change the hierarchies in society by reversing the notion that tribals, especially Lambadas who were called notified criminal tribes during colonial times, have no admission into the varna system thus having no acceptance into the spiritual domain. This also adds to the argument that in a country like India which has been subjected to several invasions, migrations and assimilation, it is difficult to decide on the origin of people. How can one be attributed caste identity and relegated to such a situation?

In a country where spiritualism is considered the monopoly of one section and the lower castes have no access to it, tribals have to prove that they too have an access and



eligibility to spiritualism and they are eligible for spirituality. Hence, the other stories like those of Seval Bhaya and others. Seval Bhaya is considered to be an incarnation of Siva and was blessed by Mother Goddess. The seven goddesses gave a pill of dirt collected from their bodies and gave it to a Lambada woman saying that a great man will be born from that pill. The Lambada woman swallowed it and gave birth to Seval Bhaya. The goddess of small pox, who was also responsible for Seval Bhaya's birth, fell in love with him. But he refused and the goddess of small pox haunted him throughout his life. Ultimately the goddess of small pox killed him and his cremation place has become a pilgrim centre which every Lambada has to visit at least once in a lifetime. The Seval Bhaya cult is being revived in recent years.

Baba Hathiram, Seva Saad, Soma Saad, Matru saad and others are the holy figures we come across in Lambada oral Literature. This also seems to be an attempt to prove their equality or superiority in spirituality. The above mentioned people reached the pinnacle of meditation and devotion. According to these legends, Baba Hathiram played indigenous chess with Lord Venkateswara. Mithu Bhukia was none other than the incarnation of Lord Kartikeya. Their meditation, devotion and intimacy with gods assure Lambadas that they are also pure and sacred like brahmins, the section who has monopoly over religion and spirituality.

Interestingly, while Lambada oral tradition ascribes Lambada origin to mythical Krishna, the first novel in Telugu *Srirangarayacharitra* or *Sonabhai Parinayamu* (1872)<sup>vi</sup> by Gopalakrishnamasetty discusses the acceptability of Lambadas and ascribes their origin to mythical Vali and Sugriva thus associating them with mythical Rama. This, in fact, throws light on an important aspect of acceptability. Any caste in India requires an association with some mythical or legendary figure. Probably this can also be traced back to the birth of four varnas from Brahma's body. Prince Rangaraya defends Lambadas by saying that Lambada lineage is from Vali and Sugriva, who were born of Indra and Surya respectively. The country of Vali and Sugriva, Kishkinda, is supposed to be modern Maharashtra. Their

language, which is spoken across the country by this tribe, also resembles Marathi.

Let me borrow here from the concept of history according to native people around the world. I would like to refer to certain peoples in particular. Australian Aboriginal and Native Canadian writers look at writing life stories as construction of histories because by recording one's own story one is recording the history of the community as well. This is not because one functions as the representative of the entire community thus pan-nativising others but because one is a part of the community and goes through a similar predicament when the whole community is subjected to atrocities and admonition.

Interestingly, in the case of Lambadas, personal life stories are not so important and are not in vogue except those of legendary Lambada figures like Seval Bhaya, Baba Hathiram and others. Like the traditional oral narratives of native people, Lambada oral tradition also celebrates the origin, past and the world. Although the modern development in writing life stories and conscious revival and reclaiming of history has not yet begun among Lambadas, they have always kept the past alive by passing it on from generation to generation as a tradition and singing it on occasions of celebration. These stories may not be careful constructions of history but they are attempts towards or tradition of preserving the past. History is not always created or recorded consciously by people who are part of it. It remains in memory and turns into the part and parcel of one's existence. Their sense of hierarchy is proved by similar tales narrated or proofs submitted by historians.

In fact, a Dalit writer Kalyana Rao, in his novel *Antaraani Vasantham* discusses how the most atrocious tales of caste discrimination, state bias, conversion, religious conflicts that took place in pre-independence India are not to be found in chronicles but are still alive in the oral tradition of the locals. This is evidence of the fact that whether books have it or not people's memory and treasure of language will always remember what is ignored and concocted by "authentic" books. To borrow a phrase from Wendy Singer once again, these stories are "living interpretations of the past". Past is memorised, articulated, shared, celebrated

without really interpreting and understanding its significance. Hence it remains alive and preserves certain crucial facts through reciting them constantly and convincing their own people about the validity and authenticity of such stories that emerge from the consciousness of their Lambada identity.

All this proves, once again, how oral tradition preserves history and provides sources to the recording of history. Without an intention to do so, oral tradition not only records history but also passes it on from generation to generation. In a similar manner, oral tradition of marginalised sections expresses their suppressed anger, agony and repressed hopes and aspirations in order to topple the hegemony and establish a just place for their community in society. Fortunately, the very culture of oral tradition, becoming occasional songs and everyday stories, helps in imbibing a sense of history in younger generations without having to go to schools and without any compulsion.

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<sup>i</sup> One of the major tribes in India, who have been the notified criminal tribes during the colonial rule in some regions and now recognized as denotified tribes.

<sup>ii</sup> Petrone, Penny. *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990.

<sup>iii</sup> Russell R.V. and Rai Bahadur Hira Lal. *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*. Vol. II, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1975.

<sup>iv</sup> Crooke, W. *The Tribes and Castes of North-Western Provinces and Oudh* Vol.I. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1962.

<sup>v</sup> Here are some more details about the origin and migration of Lambadas. *Census of India 1961* Vol. 1 states that Ptolemy, in his list of Indian castes, has made a mention of a caste called 'Lambatai' which is considered by some as Lambada. The same volume states that the first historical mention of Lambadas of Deccan is found in *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Mohammedan Faith in the Country of the Hind* by Mohammed Kasim Ferishta. Ferishta records, according to *the Census of India*, that in 1417, a large convoy of Banjara bullocks was seized by Khan Khanan, the brother of Feroz Shah Bahmani, when the former rebelled and made an attempt on the throne of Gulbarga. It is believed that the Banjaras might have come to the Deccan in and around 1639 with Asaf Khan, the wazir of the Mughal emperor Shahjahan. They are supposed to have carried provisions during his ride against Bijapur.

It is mentioned in the Gazetteers of the Vizagapatnam district that during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Vinayaka Deo, the then ruler of Jeypore in Orissa, crushed the rebellion in his dominion and regained the throne with the help of a Banjara leader. In his *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Thurston says that the Lambadas of Bellary (now in Karnataka) came to Deccan for the first time from the North with the Mughal contingents as commissariat carriers. William Irvine in his book *the Army of Indian Moghuls* gives a graphic account of the Banjaras as suppliers of rations to warring Indian armies.

<sup>vi</sup> Gopalakrishnamasetty, Narahari. *Srirangarayacharitra (Sonabhai Parinayamu) Hinduvulayacharamulu telupunatti Navina prabandhamu*. Madras: Thevitakara Press, 1872.