

Yagnam:

A Nexus of Globalisation and Marginalisation

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Abstract

Mainstream literature has been explicitly vocal about the exploitation of the downtrodden sections of the society. The ensuing discrimination towards this section is due to both the caste and the class position of the people. Kalipatnam Rama Rao was born in the year 1924 and is known as Kara Mestaru. Winner of Sahitya Academy Award in the year 1995 for his anthology of stories, *Yagnam to Tommidi*, Rao's stories focus on rural India and the problems faced by the rural population. Rama Rao's *Yagnam* was originally published in Telegu in 1971 and in this paper, the English translation by Subrahmanyam, which was published in the year 2001 has been used. The story of *Yagnam* is based on a rural village of Sundarapalem. The story explores the underlying reality of a well-developed village, where the contribution of the marginalised section, the Mala community goes unnoticed in the wake of the parameters that define the development of the village. In fact, the translated title of the story has been titled as 'The Sacrifice' by Subrahmanyam in this edition. The sacrifice, rather, the contribution of the Mala community surfaces through a dispute regarding the payment of a loan. The situational realities of the village are universal in its structure and can be observed in any agrarian village of India. Though on the surface level, the idyllic village of Sundarapalem is peaceful, deeper analysis questions the ideals that form the base of the societal schema. Though the villagers of Sunadarapalem are seen as a functional whole, within that functional schema, malfunctioning elements creep up, partly in the wake of commercialisation and commodification and partly due to the sluggish attitude of the state authorities in resolving the conflict about the repayment of the loan as well as the acknowledgement of the contribution of the Mala community in building of this idyllic village. This paper looks at how a community is subtly pushed to the periphery and has been paying the price of the development of the village. This development is infrastructural in its orientation and is not directed towards the overall betterment of the society as it is not wholesome. On the surface level, it is

difficult to understand how one section of the society has been deprived of the acknowledgement and the consequential benefits of their labour which lead to this development.

Keywords: *Development, Marginalisation, Class Hierarchy, Caste Hierarchy*

The magnum opus of Kalipatnam Rama Rao, *Yagnam* (1964) unveils the ways in which the downtrodden of a village, the villagers of the Mala community, are pushed further into the periphery, though on a surface level the prosperity of the village is validated through mechanisation, commercialisation and industrialisation. The advocates of globalisation as the remedy of poverty are subtly questioned by Rama Rao, and in doing so he unveils how the efforts of the marginalised section and the downtrodden go unnoticed and they are further pushed towards the periphery. The issue that reveals the reality of the plight of the underprivileged is the dispute regarding the repayment of a loan between Appalaramadu, the head of the mala caste and Gopanna, a representative of the upper caste land owners.

The village of Sundarapalem is considered to be an ideal village based on the Gandhian ideals of tolerance and mutual cooperation. The infrastructure is well developed and the village is laced with a post office, a high school, metalled roads, grand trunk road, transmission lines, national grid, village level worker's office, hospital, maternity centre, co-operative go-downs, library and electricity department's office. In fact, the narrator observes that Sundarapalem is one of its kind and adds, 'On the coastline, Sundarapalem looks like a well-bred living among several destitutes' (*Yagnam*, 2). The credits of the establishments are reaped by the upper caste villagers, and their president, a believer of Gandhian ideology himself, Sreeramulu Naidu is regarded as the harbinger of the materialistic prosperity in the village. Owing to the Gandhain ideals, the villagers live in harmony and they resolve their issues through discussions and negotiations. In fact, it is mentioned that the president, Sreeramulu Naidu and the fellow

villagers considers it a matter of shame if constitution backed state agencies are involved in solving any crisis that arises in the village.

This apparent idealism is the reason, that there are no direct clashes between the upper-caste villagers and the villagers comprising of the Mala Community in the village. It is to be assumed that the facilities available in the village are to be enjoyed by all the villagers, irrespective of their caste and class. But a deeper analysis reveals that the prosperity of the village lies in the hands of the upper caste section, who live comfortably enough to engage themselves in leisurely talks about issues ranging from scientific advancements to geo-political scenarios around the world. In fact, the narrator observes,

While some among them discuss about the electricity wiring and differences of A.C and D.C., some others talk about repairs to the pumping sets, when some touch the village politics of the surrounding villages and some others smable about from Andhra capital to America and Russia. The number of people who can talk about cinema, radio, literature meetings, exhibitions, science, progress etc., subjects and those who listen to them with interest are increasing day by day. Those who talk that old is gold and dig into the buried past are there. But their number is small. (3).

The pride of the village is revealed through educational advancement and their liberal attitudes, but the narrator is quick to point out that the other half of the village population, primarily consisting of the downtrodden and the marginalised section, '[...] go on working without knowing what leisure is' (3). This stark difference between the Malas and the landowners reveals that the outwardly peaceful and prosperous village of Sundarapalem is a society which is divided on the basis of caste and class.

The Malas of the village, the working farmers, are considered subservient. Interestingly, though there is no outward malice meted out towards them by the upper-class section, the situational realities of the working class make them furthermore marginalised and they cannot reap the benefits of the amenities available in the village. The working-class farmers are employed as daily labourers and they work on the field generally owned by the upper caste people. While the upper caste villagers are living comfortable lives

of their own, the poor people of the Mala community, the malas, are described in these words by the narrator.

While the fortunate easily spend their leisure time like this, some go on working without knowing what leisure is. In those narrow lanes with headloads of towering bundles of hay, carrying baskets and pots, with plough over shoulders and pairs of bullocks running ahead, little urchins moving along with bottles big and small tied to oily strings hanging in their hands, in the cradles of running carts, some driving the bullocks with cries of ho, ho, others mixing feed for the cattle in the courtyards, drying chillies, or gram on the threshing-floors, driving cattle into the herds, old hags weeping over the husbands or relatives dead yesterday, day before or half-year back, carrying bundles on the heads and gruel pots in the arms, selling 'green sorrel, O' sorrel', unburdening firewood carried in yoke, swinging the bagfulls to their backs, wiping sweat, gasping and running in the hot sun with waterpots over the heads, pounding rice for the day in the yard ---- they carry on working. (3)

Delving even deeper into the subject of seeming ideals that governs the village, it becomes clear that the upper caste villagers, predominantly the landowners, do not believe in the Gandhian ideals and they are class as well as caste conscious. Though they are not openly vocal about their feelings regarding the working class, in absence of the president, Sreeramulu Naidu, they are pretty critical of the seemingly liberal and the easy atmosphere, that the lower segment of the society enjoys. They still believe that they are the rulers of the agrarian community of Mala. The narrator observes that even during the ongoing debate regarding the repayment of the outstanding amount of the loan,

Some others –

Are commenting upon the arrogance of Malas, the lenience given by the rulers and the depletion of fear of sin. (27)

They still believe in the concept of ruling the marginalised section of the society, and they collectively fail to realise that in an idyllic village, there is no scope for caste-based power structure, as the functional paradigms of such a power structure are dysfunctional in their orientation as is revealed within the dictums of the two classes in *Yagnam*.

In addition to the un-named speaker of the upper caste segment, Sreeramulu Naidu's own brother-in-law, Lakshumnaidu is highly critical of both the Malas as well as of Sreeramulu Naidu, for his philanthropic intentions. His ideas about the caste division is clear and the other representative of the upper caste like Shawukar Suryam also shares similar opinion. Their shared beliefs iterate through the following words and actions,

My brother-in-law is at fault for all this. He is capable of commanding by his voice. So that he wants everyone to live by their own voice. Otherwise how much courage these cursed fellows have to talk so many things.

Those walking along and before have turned and looked at Naidu. Shawukar Suryam laid his hand on his shoulder and walked some distance. Then removed the hand. It doesn't mean not to be hasty, but that is not the place. (9)

The actions of the powerful upper caste landowners like Shawukar Suryam and Lakshumnaidu affirm that below the surface level, there are some upper caste villagers who still want to cling on to the traditional caste-based society, resulting in ideological division even within the upper caste landowners like Sreeramulu Naidu and Lakshumnaidu.

As the narrative thrust of the text reveals, the subjugated Mala community has been further pushed to the periphery, partly owing to the thinly veiled caste-based society; and the rest, owing to the vicious circle of poverty and deprivation met out by the upper caste landowners. It is only the eldest member of the mala sect in the village, Appalaramudu the headman of his caste, who has some social standing within this societal structure. About him, it is said that, 'Three fourths of the village people hold good opinion about him. Everyone tells that he is the only person among the Malas who keep his word and leads a respectable life' (4). The rest of the people of the Mala community are not given much voice in the text. Though the text does not clarify about the exact population of the Mala community, it makes clear that the Malas form the major work force of the village, and most of them are bonded agricultural labourers, who work in the field.

The voices of the Mala community are presented only through the headman of the mala sect, Appalaramudu. Therefore, the

general consensus, that are explored in the text mostly comprise the upper caste landowners, who fail to understand the significance of the Other. They fail to realise that unless the inherent caste structure is obliterated, the dominant yet silent ideological difference shall continue rotting the core of the village structure even after having the foundational stability of Gandhian ideals of tolerance and mutual cooperation.

The question of respectable life for the Mala community resurfaces from time to time, but the lack of representation of the Mala caste and the direct or indirect involvement of the upper caste villagers in depriving the Malas are left undealt. The idea of 'respectable life' requires further introspection. As the text reveals, for the upper caste landowners, the idea of respect validates itself through ethical way of living life in which no state backed agency is to be involved. In defining their idea of ethics which enables one to live a 'respectable life', the upper caste community seems to have failed in developing an ethical paradigm dealing with the issue of human labour, or in this case of bonded labour. They fail to realise that in absence of the direct interference of the state, they themselves are responsible for the collective welfare of the village. The system of financial transaction that they have indirectly enforced has created a situation, under which the Mala community is fixed within the vicious circle of poverty even more than ever before. It is interesting to note that through the voice of the only representative of the Mala community, the functional schema of the village of Sundarapalem is questioned, which is still trying to hold its head high under the garb of Gandhian ideals of tolerance and mutual cooperation.

The wise Appalaramudu understands the core problem and when suggested by the wise men (chiefly comprising of the upper caste of the village), that he should convert the unproductive waste land into cultivable land, grow crops and thus pay back Gopanna, he points out, 'There is no money to invest into it. And for the investment loan is to be taken again. By the time it reaps gold that loan accumulates with interest to the extent of its value. Toiling is our lot and the enjoyment is for him who gives the loan' (8). The truth about the functioning system of village economy is thus criticised by Appalaramudu, who realises that the investment in the form of manual labour that shall have to be met out by his

people shall never suffice in paying the debt of the upper caste Gopanna and the principal amount shall never be paid off. Just like any village economy, borrowing and lending of money regarding agricultural activities take place within the village, where the rate of interest levied is more than that of the decided by the state authorities. Sreeramulu Naidu, at the very beginning had objected to this as unjust. Later, Gopanna, himself a representative of the upper caste also reveals that he himself has been a victim of the higher rate of interest when he is forced to pay back his creditors. Therefore, he himself has to levy higher rate of interest on others. Though the state is bestowed with the responsibility of regulating interest rates, but it miserably fails to do so. In fact, there is hardly any interference regarding unjust, absurd and unregulated interest rates, which affects not only the mala community, but also the upper caste villagers at times, like Gopanna.

Rummaging through history of the agrarian Mala community, it can be realised that before the commercialisation began, under the agrarian regime, the Malas were far better off being self-sufficient. But with the advent of commercial crops, the whole stability of the Mala community is destroyed and they are gradually rendered as bonded labours. Appalaramudu points out, commercialisation brought in more money, and the agrarian community being uneducated were cheated even more. He observes, 'Further with the arrival of commercial crops along with the dispute about the measures we ryots had to fall into the jugglery of Rupees inevitably' (31).

We realise that the omnipotent marginalisation as reduced the women of the Mala community as well, who were better off in the past, under the agrarian regime, when they had the liberty to work not as bonded labourers but as independent farmers. Not only were they self-sufficient, most of them were prosperous enough to own gold jewellery. Appalaramadu says,

Babayya! In those days if you look at any big lady or even women of small or petty farmers, are like goddess Lakshmi with gold ornaments obstructing the neck movements and if nothing, at least a necklace and neckstrip used to adorn them.

Our women of poor also bear two, three viss weighing silver anklets, ringlets, armllets, bracelets, armstrips, shoulder braces, trinklets, waist-strips, children's waist strings, waist bands, why one, many were there (30).

With the advent of commercial crops, they were forced to shift their mode of cultivation and were exploited by the Shavukars, who used to control the prices of the commercial crops and the mala community with no knowledge of market regularisation were victimised the most.

Interestingly, Appalaramudu points out that with the advent of commercialisation and the resulting infrastructural development, for which the village of Sundarapalem is glorified, that the Malas were pushed further towards the periphery and since then they have not been able to release themselves from the endless circle of poverty. He points out that it's the Mala community which bore the worst impact of the commercialisation, as they contributed through their intangible physical labour, which not only went unnoticed, the resulting industrialisation gulped down the small-scale cottage industries, chiefly run by the Mala community rendering them helpless, which in turn forced them to sell their properties and become bonded labours. They were left with no choice but to sell the gold owned by their women. Even after that, their lot could not survive as there were no means left by which they could earn their livelihood. On the other hand, the upper caste land owners, like Lachumnaidu gave his strip of land for the construction of the school, which resulted in the prices of the land in the neighbouring areas to shoot up. This circle continued and the Malas, were gradually pushed towards the periphery, while landowners like Lachumnaidu became richer. The factories, not only demolished the need of their menial labour, like rice pounding, and digging out water, the malas, being uneducated could not get any benefits like employment from the factories. Appalaramudu points out that,

The whole harvest has to go to the landlord's godowns. The coolie is obstructing such a process. In times before they used to wield the stick and got it done. Now-a-days such dalls wouldn't cook. To get over the hurdle of the coolie, machines are required. Not only that; educated coolies are required. That is why these schools, that is why these roads, this electricity. To think all these amenities are for us is our brainlessness. You are writing that machines have come for pulling water. Tomorrow more machines are coming for ploughing, transplanting, field-bunding and harvesting also. Then you see the challenge.... (40)

It is also noteworthy, that both the malas as well as the landowners were both prospering in the beginning, but after commercialisation of the commodities began, the malas were reduced to paupers, while the landowners became richer, further widening the chasm between the two. Appalaramudu informs, 'First my six acres have become nine acres. After that then an acre, then half, then a quarter likewise six acres dissolved. Our gold and silver got widowed' (34). He further asserts,

Sir, not only me, in our hamlet three quarters and seventy five, many among them shepherds, some numbers among the Kapus fell and drowned in this whirlpool... Yes man, it's whirlpool. Then it should drown all the farmers. Say how it is that it drowned some and threw some over the bank. (34)

In addition to the above-mentioned argument, the Mala community is miserably failed by the state agencies as well. Though the State is endowed with the responsibility of ensuring that the rights of its citizens are upheld, the State fails its citizens on two different levels. First, there are no suitable employment opportunities in the village, especially for the uneducated malas. Though the State is bestowed with the responsibility of protecting the unemployed, it fails miserably to fulfil its duties toward the citizens. Apart from that, instead of encouraging and promoting small scale cottage industries, we see that the existing ones, on which the livelihood of many people in Mala community depended are shut down and they are driven towards unemployment, thus resulting in poverty.

Rummaging further, we realise that before the advent of globalisation and commercialisation began, the Mala community members also used to own land but are now pushed to the periphery and in absence of the seemingly goodwill of a few villagers, they might have been obliterated altogether as well, with no representation in the village economy. The general consensus of the upper-class land owners is that since the loan had been taken from Gopanna, it should be returned with the interest. They argue that the last piece of land that the Malas own, ought to be sold to pay off the debt. Though there is no use of violence of any kind, but the clan is left with no cultivable land of their own and are therefore, forced to be bonded labourers for the rest of their lives

and Appalaramadu, being a representative of the Malas, accepts the fate of his people. He asserts, 'If not me or my sons my grandsons at least will repay your debt, and not default' (5). This idea proves to be too burdensome for Sitaramadu, the son of Appalaramadu, who kills his own son to avoid the fate of a bonded labourer.

While there is a village high school, the children of the Mala community are deprived of the village high school, though it is not explicitly on the basis of caste, but the situation for the Mala community is so adverse, that the children do not have the liberty to attend schools and get education. Not only him, nowhere is it mentioned that the younger generation, including Appalaramadu's grandchildren attend the village high school. Though the reasons are not explicitly revealed, it is not difficult to understand that the children are working as underpaid labourers themselves and are probably exploited even more. Given their squalid living condition, they are fighting utmost poverty and fail to consume even two proper meals a day. Appalaramadu points out that when Sreeramulu approached him regarding the school, he had thought, '[...] are studies the first thing for the burning stomach?' (37). The children, driven out of poverty, start working at a very young age. They are underpaid, and gradually they end up becoming bonded labourers working for the upper caste landowners. There is no respite for them, with no humanity either from the upper caste villagers or from the state agencies.

Though the current Indian constitution has declared education as a fundamental right, but it was implemented as late as in 2010. It becomes clear that a large faction of the village population specially the Malas are illiterate, and given the present helpless condition, there is no possibility of betterment of the Mala community through education. Appalaramadu says, 'Sirs, it is a debt or not, if so what time's debt and how accumulated all of it we uneducated brutes do not know. Elders you are there. Over and above, Sreeramulu Babu is there. You have to think over and tell.' (22).

Conclusion

On the 29th of June, 2009, in an interview with Sahitya Academy, Kalipatnam Rama Rao asserts that mainstream literature has avoided the primary agrarian life. He further states that through

Yagnam, he has tried to point out how the five years plans have actually depropertised the marginalised sections of the society.

The Mala community of the village has no social position within the structural schema, and their rights are curtailed by the upper caste villagers and even in their helplessness, there is no interference by the State agencies and the authorities. Throughout *Yagnam*, though the Malas are not subjected to physical or sexual violence, they are gradually reduced to the level of paupers and are further marginalised. It shows that though violence may not be explicit in the body of writing, it can still be present, which manifests itself through other ways. Commercialisation and industrialisation are not solutions to poverty. Furthermore, the State should try to realise the possible consequences on the weaker and the marginalised section of the society.

There is an urgent need to redefine the parameters that validate development. One needs to look at the larger picture of how the benefits are being distributed. As per the text, it is clearly evident that only the upper caste and class landowners benefit from the outcomes of these developments.

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