

# Tracing Roots: Role of Myth in constructing Dalit Identity with regard to the Play *from the Nether* (*Nadugaddika*)

Vishnupriya CV  
Research Scholar,  
Research and Postgraduate Department the of English,  
ST. Thomas' College (Autonomous) Thrissur.

## **Abstract**

The present paper entitled Tracing Roots is an attempt to trace out how the concept of myth is used to determine the life and belief system of adivasi community in Wayanad which includes both adiyars and panyars as reflected in KJ Baby's famous play Nadugaddika. The paper endeavors to examine the play in its mythical background to highlight how it contributed to both the physical and the psychological suppression of the tribe. The major objective of the study includes a scrutiny of each of such stories and songs to examine their validity, affinity towards other cultures and its drastic effects on the lives of tribal people. It also looks forward to throw light on how the dominant group used such beliefs as a tool of hegemony and how consequently it led to a tendency of repression among the tribals. On the whole this study can be described as an effort to portray the evolution of spiritual suppression that lies latent among these tribes.

Key words: myth, suppression, identity

## **Introduction**

"I remember, I remember how we were made to work like animals, to realize Tamburan's dreams. I remember how our fathers fared in those times" (Nadugaddika 47).

The term Dalit has become a widely discussed one particularly with reference to the socio political events of the present scenario. Thus it is crucial to begin by answering the question: who is a Dalit or what is Dalit literature. The renowned Marathi writer Sarankumar Limbale, in an interview for Hindu says "Dalit literature uses the written word as a weapon against the inhuman oppression of Dalits by the Brahminical social order that denies them basic human rights and dignity. He further says that the uprising of the written word against the millennia- old social injustice manifesting itself as brutalities committed on Dalits all over the country".

KJ Baby, renowned writer and film director of south india can be said as such man who used his pen as a weapon to express the voice of the voiceless. Apart from *Nadugaddika* which has got an English translation under the title *From the Nether*, his other works include *Mavelimantam* and *Bespurkana*. *Mavelimantam* won the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 1994. He along with his wife has founded Kanavu, an alternative forum for the Adivasi children. He received the fame of a director through the film *Guda* or *The Cage* which told the story of Kattunayakar tribe. Likely his play *Naddugadika* is also an attempt not only to portray the pathetic existence of the downtrodden but also throws light on the various reasons and origin behind their prolonged slavery under Thamburan or the dominant class in their tongue. For the pursuit of tracing the evolution of the institution of slavery among the Adiyars and Paniya caste of Wayanad, he has incorporated quite a number of songs which is capable to provide a deep impression on their unique ways of living. A close examination of such songs would reveal that in reality, such stories played a great role in making them believe that they are born to serve the upper class.

### Discussion

The concept of being the Other is not novel to put to a discussion. It is one of the dominant strategies employed for many times in history as a medium to secure power. It is also crucial to note that in order establish hegemony over the natives the latter has used numerous tactics including both physical and psychological oppression. The colonizer used to study their language and life style in order to make them convinced of their inferior existence. But here in the play what one could see is that mythological stories in which unnatural figures and supernatural forces appear is used as the major tool to assert their necessity of being the other and oppressed for a whole life only on the ground that they have born to a particular community. The Adiyas and Paniyas are the major castes that founded place in *Naddugadika*. They were considered the lowest by themselves and others. They own no land. In olden days, masters would provide them with a small portion of land for each group as a colony which is usually on the borders of paddy fields on which they are entitled to work. After a year or few, the masters would ask them to move on to other plot on which they could do nothing except conducting an exodus to the newly allotted place leaving behind everything they nurtured there. Thus always in a state of flux, they could own nothing and have to depend on the master permanently for food and shelter. These Adiyas and Paniyas have their own languages, but these

have no alphabets or written symbols. They have their own customs, tradition, songs rituals and legends. A small drum called Thudi is a part of all these rituals. Each ritual calls for a different rhythm from this thudi. And like all languages, these too are the results of the evolution of their collective thinking.

The word Adiya literally means slaves. Naturally this must be what their masters choose to call them. They identify themselves with the name *Ravular*. Centuries of slavery has now made them believe themselves as born slaves. Their song says:

Ayyantadiyan nankalay

Mamumdatadyam nankaley

Maleladiyan nankaley

Chettiladiyan nankaley

We are the slaves of Ayyans, we are the slaves of the lords of the hills, and we are the slaves of the lords of the field. They differ from the latter in their dress, language and customs. The tunes produced using their *Thudi* are also different. A journey through the stories and songs of their civilization would reveal that they played a significant part in dragging them to ages of bondage.

Possessing no technological skills, no weapons like bow and arrow, they are believed to be living by conducting fruit gathering expeditions.

theKarappan Moopan of pulpally,

unnicken of Perumchola,

Kolumben of Karimoola,

Chindan Moopan of Chittariparamba,

This is the story each of them recounted:

Long ago there lived the Utthappan and Uthamma who were brother and sister. One day they were wandering through the jungle in search of food and fruit. They were believed to be seen by the ippimala Gowda. He decided to baite them with the remains of his food. A fiber net was fabricated and was cast on them and they got intoxicated with the smell of cooked food.

When Bhatte Kurma brought the two before the Gowda, it seems he asked them “Of which caste are you, which clan?” and they replied “We are the lowest caste, lower than all castes, all clans” The Gowda

made them slaves. He wanted more slaves and he asked them to increase the tribe. The master succeeded in mating them. They gave birth to five sons and daughters. The eleventh child died. The first slave burial took place accompanied by the first slave dirge. The Gowda and Bhatte Kuruma in this legend are two dominant castes of the region. The former were the followers of Jainism. They were the first people who owned the Paniyas. The caste consciousness of the characters is interpreted by various scholars as a later addition for the purpose of subjugation.

Taking the history of Adiyas in to consideration, it can be described as a story of cultural enslavement as revealed in their *Peleppattu*. Long ago there was a time when Mavellymanavatheyyam lived. At his reign, caste divisions was absent among them. One day when he went to take some rest, Lords who came as guests had stolen his treasure, the earth. In order to regain his possessions, the king had to undergo an experiment as proposed by the Lords. He and the Lords would bathe in a nearby river- him at the upstream and the Lords at the downstream. The sole condition put forward by the Lords was that if the Lords have taken the earth, the muddy water will flow upwards. If he had taken the earth, the muddy water will flow downwards. Naturally water had flowed downwards and the king was defeated. Then the Lords took out the stolen earth which was described as containing multicoloured soil. They started separating each colour. With the black earth they made the black men. With red earth, red men and with the white earth white men. But however much the lord tried, these new people did not get up and obey them. So the lords sent Mali to arouse them with fear. Mali came with bulging eyes. Seeing this fierce mother Goddess, these obedient people got up and ran in different directions. Those who rolled away became Urunda Baduvan, those who cried 'Ah' became Paniyas, those who said 'Aathava' became Ravuler, those who grumbled became Mullukurma, those who asked 'who is there' became the Masters. And in this way each became a different tribe according to the manner in which they reacted to Mali.

There is also another story which describes their futile attempt to liberate themselves. The very first parents of Adiyas, Melorachan and Keeorithi tried to escape. Finally they reached at a place called Pakkom in Wayanad. There lived Pakkathappan, the Lord of Pakkom. He caught and enslaved them. They managed to escape from there also. But there also the cold blooded Mali reappeared. Where ever they went Mali followed them and drove them back. Thus both the tribes got enslaved in different periods of history. But once they

became oppressed, their vast world that once spread over hills, valleys and forests got shrunk in to the patches of the different plots belonged to the masters.

### Conclusion

A close examination of the above mentioned points throws light on some crucial aspects behind the history and nature of their bondage. The very word Adiyar as the tribe calls refers to this. It means nothing but slaves. Thus through the medium of language and its repeated usage the dominant class had succeeded in creating a consciousness of inferiority and wounded pride among the members of the tribe. The content of the songs are also significant that they could be said as framed with a purpose. As far as the story of Uthamma and Uthappan is concerned, it is pivotal to note the instance where they introduce themselves before Gowda as the lowest of all castes. But a crucial question that remains latent in the story is that: if they are the real forefathers of the tribe who or which is the force that had installed this caste consciousness in them. Thus it is evident that the hands behind these stories intended to make it as a God given status. A pseudo divinity can be sensed in all these narrations to which the tribals remained ignorant. The presence of the supernatural figure like Mali is also noteworthy. Mali comes first as the agent of those lords who introduced the system of racial difference. The tribes even get their names according to their reaction to Mali. It comes again as a agent of Paakathapan to imprison the first parents of Ravular and to keep them as his slaves. The fear she generates kills their spirit of adventure and love for freedom. The tribesmen began to believe that they are under the constant observation of this fierce figure. They strongly believe that they could not escape from her yoke where ever they go. So this can be concluded as a spiritual enslavement rather than a physical one. In a sense it is apt to conclude that the tribals are in a way willing enough to succumb to this fate. Mali can be delineated as nothing but the personification of the caste system itself which follow and influence them forever in their lives. *Nadugaddika* in accordance with the literal meaning of the word signifies one of their rituals in which they perform special practices for the evasion of evil spirits from society. But at the end the reader could realize that the fierce evil spirit that should be erased from any society is the evil practices which surround the institution of caste system in any society.

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