south asia multidisciplinary academic journal

South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal

28 | 2022
Subalternity, Marginality, Agency in Contemporary India

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OpenEdition Journals

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/7944
DOI: 10.4000/samaj.7944
ISSN: 1960-6060

Publisher
Association pour la recherche sur l'Asie du Sud (ARAS)

Electronic reference
Aya Ikegame, "New Dalit Assertion and the Rejection of Buffalo Sacrifice in South India", *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], 28 | 2022, Online since 17 May 2022, connection on 08 July 2022. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/7944 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.7944

New Dalit Assertion and the Rejection of Buffalo Sacrifice in South India

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Introduction

1 In the late 1980s, some Mādigas, one of the most discriminated against former untouchable groups in central Karnataka, began refusing to participate in the sacrifice of buffaloes for the village goddesses in Tumakuru (previously called Tumkur) district in the state of Karnataka, South India.[1] Their refusal began in small village temples before gradually growing in scale. Finally, in 2016, they succeeded in stopping the sacrifice of buffaloes in temple X. I shall not reveal the name of the temple because despite the fact that the police took the side of the Mādigas and arrested several caste Hindus who had forced them to perform the ritual, the whole event was considered to be highly sensitive in the locality. No outsiders were allowed to witness or even ask about the incident.[2] The goddess that temple X was dedicated to was regarded as the most powerful village goddess in the district, therefore the prevention of the sacrifice was a real triumph for local Mādigas. We have to be cautious here, since not all Mādigas —let alone Dalits of Karnataka—are invested in the refusal, but this is still an interesting example of a growing Dalit political assertion which demands that scholars rethink the ways in which Dalits have been regarded as a part of Hindu culture, the village republic and the caste "system."

2 Dalit writers have questioned theories of the caste system devised by social scientists that characterized it "as a social structure that encouraged consensus by emphasizing the principles of 'reciprocity' and 'interdependence' among various caste groups" (Satyanarayana 2014:49). This characterization, they claim, has allowed severe discrimination and exploitation of Dalits by caste Hindus to be hidden and normalized in the name of culture and tradition.

3 Some historians have begun to trace the history of the concealment of the large hereditary unfree laboring classes, a group who have been subjected to inhumane treatment for centuries. This work has revealed that both the British government and the Indian landed elites failed to prioritize this issue as an urgent one in which the state should intervene. Rupa Viswanath (2014) has clearly demonstrated how British officials prevented the empire-wide abolition of slavery from applying to India by constructing what they termed the "Pariah Problem." This labelled the problem as a primarily religious issue and the government's policy of religious neutrality became a convenient excuse to allow discrimination to continue. Viswanath also suggests that Indian elites of the early twentieth century did not fundamentally challenge the view held by colonial administrators that the Pariah Problem was not something the government could solve by enforcing the rights of Dalits as equal citizens. They instead saw the problem of untouchability not as political but as social, placing it in an extra-governmental realm where native elites dealt with issues through successive social reforms (Viswanath 2014). Social reformist and nationalist consciousness suppressed the question of caste discrimination and untouchability within India in order to construct a coherent nation that could fight against foreign rule.

4 The suffocation of Dalit voices and denial of their agency featured not only in the high-caste dominated Congress movements of the North but also in the anti-Brahmin sub-nationalist movements in the South. V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai (1998) re-examined a vast corpus of Tamil writings by Dalit intellectuals from the late nineteenth century, such as Iyothee Thass, Masilamani, A. P. Periyasami Pulavar, and T. C. Narayanasami Pillay. They showed Dalits to be "in an always already antagonistive relationship to Brahminical Hinduism" (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998:104) and claimed that Dalits were "a part of the great Dravidian fraternity comprising all non-brahmin (non-Aryan) castes, but in themselves, they represented the oldest cultural segment of the fraternity" (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998:108). Dalits were thus characterized as the "Poorva [original] Tamizhar." For many of the Dalit intellectuals at the turn of the century, the ancient Buddhist past, where a totally egalitarian inclusive culture was possible, was a source of inspiration. They believed that the arrival of the Aryans and Hinduism destroyed their society and cunningly incorporated Buddhist ideas and practices into a hierarchical and discriminatory Hindu ideology. It is important that the new colonialist knowledges provided idioms and arguments which native intellectuals (both Dalits and non-Dalits) could deploy (Geetha and Rajadurai 1998:108–09). Later in this article we will see how this ironical but interesting dialogue between colonialist understandings and Dalit self-assertion has continued to the present day. This dialogue inspired Dalits who were trying to recover a sense of self-worth and a personal history, but it was, perhaps unconsciously, omitted from the social science studies of the twentieth century and even the post-colonial studies of the late twentieth century.

5 This article will first examine contemporary politics regarding the Dalit refusal of the buffalo sacrifice in Tumakuru district through the writings and activities of the late M. C. Raj, an NGO leader-turned-spiritual-guru for local Mādigas. The gap between the understanding of the Goddess Māramma by local Dalit activists and the common interpretation in the late twentieth century will become apparent. Then we will re-examine Christian missionaries' descriptions of the sacrifice on which most of the twentieth century anthropological studies relied and see how structuralist anthropologists and sociologists erased Dalit voices within the vast corpus of original

accounts. Finally, we will trace a genealogy of the discourse that regards Dalits as the original inhabitants of the region. We will see how this hidden but persistent idea eventually culminated in the Dalit refusal of the buffalo sacrifice.

Dalit defiance and its political significance

6 As I will show later, the reasons behind Dalit non-participation in the buffalo sacrifice have been manifold. However, the main objection appears to be that many of them now see this ritual as humiliating and demeaning. Not only does it require them to engage in many dangerous acts, but also small mistakes in the process can lead to physical violence and even the loss of life. The buffalo sacrifice is rarely performed in Karnakata, partly because it is expensive and partly because it is illegal. If it is performed, the sacrifice and related rituals are conducted in absolute secrecy (Ikegame Forthcoming). Therefore, I was not able to witness any actual sacrifice during fieldwork (although I have visited the temple where buffalo sacrifices have been banned) and my accounts come from interviews with NGO workers and some Dalit villagers[3] in Tumakuru district.

7 One important Dalit task after the sacrifice is scattering rice mixed with the bull's blood over the village fields. This ritual is considered to be very important as it ensures a good harvest and eliminates evil spirits. It is supposed to be performed barefooted. In 1988 a Mādiga man in a village in Tumakuru district was severely beaten by caste Hindus immediately after the completion of the village goddess festival and nearly lost his life; he had worn sandals for the scattering as he had previously injured his foot. The Mādigas in the village then decided to refuse to participate in the Buffalo sacrifice, despite a variety of social boycotts being imposed by caste Hindus.[4]

8 Other rituals require Dalits to go through physically torturous processes. In some areas in Bellari (formally spelled as Bellary) district, I was told that a prepubescent boy from a particular Dalit family is chosen to scatter the blood-rice. Before the act, all his body hair (including eyebrows and eyelashes) is removed and he has to run alone around several villages with bare feet in the total dark of night. If he fails to perform his role properly, the young boy and his family are punished. The mother of the small boy can only pray that her son returns safely.[5]

9 For caste Hindus (non-Dalit Hindus) in the village, including those who are just above Dalits in the traditional caste hierarchy, the refusal of the sacrifice by Dalits is among the worst of offenses. It is easily taken as a challenge and even an insult to the supposed harmonious social order of the rural village community. Caste Hindus, especially landed dominant castes, Lingayats and Okkaligas, often claim that they have allowed Dalits to acquire education, land and even government jobs. To express their discontent, they often mockingly call Dalits "government Brahmanas."[6] However, despite strong feelings of anxiety about losing their authority over Dalits and their resentment towards the government's positive discrimination policy, most of the dominant landed agriculturalist castes in the region see the rise of Dalits as inevitable.[7] And yet, their refusal of buffalo sacrifice remains unacceptable, because without Dalit participation, the whole event must be cancelled.

M. C. Raj and Dalitology

10 I first heard of the Dalit protest against buffalo sacrifice while in conversation with M. C. Raj (1952–2017),[8] an NGO social worker who became the leader or guru of a Dalit spiritual movement. He and his wife Jyothi were already well-known social workers amongst development workers and academics in Karnataka and beyond. Their NGO, the Rural Education for Development Society (REDS),[9] in Tumakuru city has been active in providing leadership training and promoting education on rural development and human rights. Both government and non-governmental organizations, including local Dalit organizations such as Dalit Sangarsha Samithi, send their employees and young members to the REDS for training. The REDS has received national and international funding for their developmental projects, which range from solar lamp projects to the land recovery movement in Mādiga-dominated villages.

11 While he and his wife, Jyothi were well known for their social work, the publication of M. C. Raj's book *Dalitology* in 2001 made him famous, or rather controversial. In the book, he declared that Dalits do not belong to Hinduism nor to any other established religion. He denounced not only Brahminical Hinduism but also other religions, including Christianity and Buddhism, as a part of "the dominant order" that systematically denies and undermines the ethical world of Dalits. He instead claimed that Dalits already possess their own religion or spiritual world that needs to be rediscovered and acknowledged. In his subsequent publications (Raj 2006; Raj and Jyothi 2007, 2008), he continued to present this spiritual domain of Dalits as the cultural and political basis for self-governance and a true liberation to come. He established a center for this Dalit-centered spiritual movement called the Booshakti Kendra (Power of Earth Centre)[10] outside Tumakuru city and moved there, living in a self-built house with many animals.

12 His "spiritual turn" and denunciation of other established religions alienated many of his original supporters and sympathizers. Both M. C. Raj and his wife Jyothi were Christian Dalits and trained in the Christian-dominated NGO sector in Tamil Nadu. Some Christian Dalit leaders thus could not stand his denunciation of faith and took it as betrayal. Some academics, including my acquaintances, saw his pro-Dalit stance as ridiculous and possibly dangerous. Many local Mādiga leaders saw Raj and his wife as total outsiders and, especially at the beginning of their NGO activities in the 1980s, they were regarded as Christian missionaries trying to convert Mādigas. The caste background of Raj did not help either. His family belonged to the Nadar caste (formerly known as Shanars). Members of this caste were traditionally palmyra tree climbers and toddy tappers, but upwardly mobile sections changed their caste name to the more respectable sounding Nadar and claimed a much higher ritual status in the early twentieth century.[11] Although they had suffered from certain discriminations in the past, Nadars themselves have claimed that they were not Dalits and would not wish to self-identify as Dalits.[12] Although Raj self-identified as Dalit, it is not surprising that some do not see him as one.

13 One of the notable achievements of Raj and Jyothi is probably the creation of the Dalit Panchayat movement. When they began to use the term Adijan, meaning "original inhabitants," rather than Dalits around 2010, they renamed it the Adijan Panchayat. The idea comes from Raj's conviction that village panchayats, both in the traditional and constitutional sense, are still dominated by caste Hindus despite the positions

reserved for Dalits. He claimed that Dalits need to organize themselves and create their own governing body (the Adijan Panchayat) where they can discuss and decide on their own issues without the intervention of caste Hindus. Once this self-governing body has been established, it can then become a negotiating platform where both Dalits/Adijans and caste Hindus can discuss and negotiate as equals. His strategy was not to be confrontational like many other Dalit movements before him, but to be flexible and to find a way to work cooperatively with caste Hindu groups and the state apparatus. Even though his policy and conviction did not necessarily keep him out of trouble (quite the opposite in reality), he had the rare capacity to be a pragmatic realist and at the same time uphold his radical ideals.

14 At the time M. C. Raj wrote *Dalitology* in 2001, he seemed to be much more radical and enthusiastic about an autonomous space for Dalits. He even wrote about the creation of Dalitstan, a Dalit state, and seemed to claim that all India was always and already Dalitstan:

> Through the cumulative effect of all the efforts of our ancestors and our contemporary elders we must be able to establish India as a Dalitstan. It will not be any more Hindustan. We are not asking for a separate State for the Dalits. The whole of India is our country. (Raj 2001:652)

15 He also talked about the Dalit *sena*, Dalit army, and even recruited some local Dalit youth for it (clearly this alarmed many). However, he soon dropped the idea of the Dalit army and other bold claims.

16 He listed things that the Dalit Panchayat should achieve, including the refusal of buffalo sacrifice:

> The Dalit Panchayat should prevent the "Dalit job" during the Māramma festival in some states of India. In Karnataka, for example, the Dalit people are traditionally forced to cut the buffalo during Māramma festival, mix its blood with rice, eat some of it and scatter the rest over the fields of the dominant caste people. Many atrocities have been committed against the Dalits if they do not run fast, if they do not run bare foot etc. Let no Dalit Panchayat allow it at any cost. The responsibility of the DP will be effectively preventing it. There will be always somebody who will say, "Yeh, he is poor, let him do it." This is what the DP must guard against. Strict community discipline should be ensured till a time that we restore the dignity of our people. (Raj 2001:690–91)

17 But he was taking a slow and measured approach, knowing that the refusal to take part in the buffalo sacrifice was far more contentious than any other negotiations that Adijan Panchayats were engaging in with caste Hindus in the village.

The origin tale of Māramma

18 When I asked M. C. Raj about the significance of the refusal to participate in the sacrifice, he elaborated upon the mythical background of the ritual.[13] The following is a summary from the recording in which he narrated the story of Māramma to me:

> The buffalo is the ancestor of Dalits. There are stories also associated with Dalits. The story goes like this: Māramma is a Brahmin girl and Kadharaiya is a Dalit boy. They both fall in love. But when they fell in love, Māramma did not know that Kadharaiya was a Dalit. He was very attractive with a robust body. She liked him and did not bother to check his background. They married and had children. One day, Kadharaiya's mother came to see her son. Māramma cooks all vegetarian food for her mother-in-law. At the end of the meal, Māramma offers *sihi kadubu* (a deep-

> fried dumpling-like sweet snack eaten especially at the time of the Ganesha festival) and tells them that she has to go out to buy some food. But she hides behind the wall and listens to their conversation.
> Kadharaiya asked his mother how she found [the] *kadubu* his wife made. To which, she answered: "it is very well done. But still there is nothing better than sucking bones." Hearing this conversation, Māramma suddenly realizes who her husband actually is. He is undoubtedly an untouchable. She becomes extremely furious and starts catching her own seven children, trying to kill them. She kills six children but the seventh escapes. There is a community of Dalits called Asādi who are believed to be the descendants of the seventh child. Māramma then chases her husband and cuts off his head. Here there are several versions of the myth. One version says that when she cuts his head, [a] buffalo's head emerges, suggesting that the true form of Kadharaiya is a buffalo. The other story talks about [how] Kadharaiya hid himself inside a buffalo before he was killed.

19 The worship of the village goddess has been recognized as one of the most important aspects of the village religious landscape of South India. She is worshipped as a fierce, independent goddess distinctively different from other goddesses who are primarily consorts of male gods (typically Shiva or Vishnu). The village goddess Māramma possesses the extraordinary power (*shakti*) to cure diseases such as smallpox and chicken pox, as well as the power of causing them. She is considered to be simultaneously the protector of a village (or a cluster of villages) while also having the power to destroy them.

20 Throughout the twentieth century, the worship of village goddesses was often understood in the context of a framework of bilateral opposition: great tradition vs. little tradition, the Brahminical vs non-Brahminical, Aryan vs. Dravidian, and elite vs. popular. Māramma is a representative manifestation of the latter. While great gods are conformed to fit (or tamed) within the vegetarian Vedic tradition, the village goddess possesses an ambiguous, dangerous, and powerful nature. David Kinsley (1986), for instance, describes her in the following way:

> Although the great gods (of the Hindu pantheon) are acknowledged to be in charge of distant, cosmic rhythms, they are only of a limited interest to most villagers, many of whom traditionally were not allowed within the precincts of the temples of these deities in the first place. The village goddess, in contrast, engages the villagers directly by being associated with their local, existential concerns. Finally, these village deities are often directly associated with disease, sudden death, and catastrophe. When the village is threatened by disaster, particularly epidemics, the local goddess is usually said to be manifesting herself. She erupts onto the village scene along with disasters that threaten the stability, and even the survival, of the village. Furthermore, her role vis-à-vis such epidemics or disasters is ambivalent. She is perceived both as inflicting these diseases and as protecting the village from them (Kinsley 1986:199).

21 Contrasting village goddess worship with that of the great gods of the Hindu pantheon has been a widely accepted practice amongst scholars, with the ambiguous role of the village goddess attracting especial attention. The scholarly analysis, particularly that directed specifically at buffalo sacrifice, has tended to emphasize the revitalization of the village as a whole through arousing the goddess' anger and energy (Kinsley 1986). Little thought, however, has been given to the elements of the ritual that are highly antagonistic towards Dalits. The story of Māramma narrated to me by M. C. Raj strongly hints there might be a fierce contestation between the non-Dalit and Dalit population within the village tradition.[14]

22 There has been a tendency among scholars to regard the world of great tradition as Vedic and Sanskritic and dominated by Brahmins. Little traditions, meanwhile, are seen as the domain of rural non-Brahmin folks, including Dalits. The worship of village goddesses is situated as central to the latter. However, if Māramma, the village goddess, is a Brahmin woman and the buffalo she slays is an incarnation of her Dalit husband, the interpretation of Māramma worship as a whole must be drastically re-written. Dalits, at least the Mādigas of Tumakuru, understand this ritual as an enactment of the goddess' revenge against her Dalit partner. Thus, participating in the sacrifice may mean that they are forced to kill themselves. M. C. Raj claims that many Dalits in southern India see buffaloes as their own ancestor or symbol (see also Illaiah [2019]'s call for "Buffalo Nationalism"). In this context, it perhaps sounds odd that this association does not prevent them from eating buffalo meat. Indeed, one of the attractions of participating in the buffalo sacrifice was the distribution of its meat; many Dalits thought of it as a rare treat. A high degree of subtlety is therefore required of us to fully understand the contestation around the sacrifice. Dalits do not mind the killing and eating of buffaloes in normal circumstances, but they object to it in this particular ritual context and to the inhumane acts that they are forced to perform and the violent retaliation if they fail to perform (for a similar discussion see Hoskin [1993]). We shall see now how earlier accounts of the sacrifice depicted the violence and the subjugation of Dalits.

Colonial accounts of the buffalo sacrifice

23 Full descriptions of the buffalo sacrifice in South India[15] in the early twentieth century were made by three men: Henri Whitehead, the Bishop of Madras; Edgar Thurston, an anthropologist obsessed with anthropometry; and Welber Theodore Elmore, the Pastor of a Baptist Church. They not only collected myths and interviewed villagers themselves, but also acquired information using their networks of Christian missionaries and colonial officers stationed in the region.

24 Of the three men, Henri Whitehead (1863–1947) provided the most detailed and varied descriptions of the grand sacrifice. His accounts of village worship were first published in 1907,[16] and compiled from his observations and information from colonial officers, Christian missionaries and high caste informants in the Telugu, Kannada, and Tamil speaking regions of South India. Subsequently in 1921, he published his observations in a book titled *The Village Gods of South India*. This volume remains a major source for studying the worship of village goddesses in South India. In it, he described details of village rituals, including buffalo sacrifice, giving many different versions of the sacrificial rites. Here, I will summarize his account collected in the Kannada speaking region of Bellary (Whitehead 1921:72–73). The ritual and myth are very similar to the descriptions I heard in areas of Tumakuru district, which is adjacent to Bellary. Whitehead received this account of the festival of the village goddess Uramma from one Asādi.[17]

25 There are many preparations for the sacrifice: the placing of an earthen lamp, the construction of a wooden image of the goddess and a small cart, and the erection of a pandal (booth) with a raised platform in an open space in the village. On a Tuesday, a first sacrifice of a sheep or goat at the carpenter's house is carried out. The image of the goddess is taken by the villagers to the booth in a procession. Clean cloths, flowers, a

pot of toddy, some limes and other articles are offered and used in pujas. The lighted lamp is brought in a procession from the house of the Reddy, a member of the landed dominant caste in Andhra Pradesh and Bellary district in Karnataka. Boiled rice, flowers, betel leaves, nuts, plantain, and coconuts are offered, and camphor and incense burned. Then the buffalo is brought from the Dalit quarters to the pandal, ten or twelve Asādis dance before it and sing songs in honor of the goddess.[18] Food and water are withheld from the buffalo for the whole day and it is garlanded with flowers and decorated with turmeric and red kumkuma. Here, Whitehead clearly states that this buffalo, named Gauda-Kona, is the representation of "the Outcaste husband who pretended to be a Brahmin and married the Brahman girl, now worshipped as Uramma" (Whitehead 1921:73). His description of the sacrifice continues:

> When it [the buffalo] arrives at the pandal, it is laid on its side upon the ground and its head is cut off by one of the Mādigās with the sacrificial chopper. Its neck is placed over a small pit, which has been dug to receive the blood, and the entrails are taken out and placed in the pit with the blood. The right leg is then cut off below the knee and put cross-wise in the mouth, some fat from the entrails is placed on the forehead and a small earthenware lamp, about as large as a man's two hands, with a wick as thick as his thumb, is placed on the fat and kept there lighted, till the festival is over. Some of the blood and entrails are then mixed with some boiled rice and placed in a new basket, which a Mādigā, stripped naked, places on his head and takes round the boundary of the village fields, accompanied by a washerman carrying a torch, and followed by a few of the villagers. He sprinkles the rice, blood, and entrails all round the boundary. (Whitehead 1921:73)

26 The mixture of blood and rice was considered to be extremely precious and was guarded with the greatest care as it was believed that the benefits of the sacrifice could be transferred to another village with it (Whitehead 1921:73). Whitehead reported that in earlier days those who stole the blood-rice were pursued and murdered, and thus no one from another village was allowed near it. On the next day, offerings and sacrifices of smaller beasts continued. The heads and flesh from the sacrifices were distributed according to caste. After sunset, the goddess on the wooden cart was taken in procession to the boundary of the village with an Asādi walking in front and carrying the head of the buffalo on his head. At the limit of the village lands, they left the image on their side of the boundary and there it stayed. The festival ended here.

27 Whitehead recorded the reluctance of Mādigas to perform their dedicated role of scattering blood-rice (Whitehead 1907:139). This same ritual is also described by Thurston (1909:313):

> The blood is caught in a vessel, and sprinkled over some boiled rice, and then the head [of the sacrificed buffalo], with the right foreleg in the mouth, is placed before the shrine on a flat wicker basket, with the rice and blood on another basket just below it. A lighted lamp is placed on the head, and then another Mādiga carries it on his own head round the village, with a new cloth dipped in the blood of the victim tied round its neck. This is regarded here and elsewhere as a very inauspicious and dangerous office, and the headman of the village has to offer considerable inducements to persuade a Mādiga to undertake it. Ropes are tied round his body, as he goes round, to prevent his being carried off by evil spirits, and limes are cut in half and thrown into the air, so that the demons may catch at them instead of at the man. It is believed that gigantic demons sit on the tops of tall trees ready to swoop down and carry him away, in order to get the rice and the buffalo's head.

28 Despite the strict caste norms portrayed in the legends of village goddesses and the humiliating and dangerous roles given to Dalits during the rituals, Whitehead

interpreted the buffalo sacrifice as simply a case of totemism. For him, the garlanding and worship of the victim-buffalo, the feast in the presence of the deity, the application of sacrificial blood to the worshippers (actually only Dalits), their houses and cattle, and the scattering of the blood-rice on the street and village boundaries all suggested that the purpose of the worship was "to cement and strengthen the alliance between the human clan and the animal clan" (Whitehead 1907:180). Even the "wearing of the entrails round the neck and the putting of the liver in the mouth" by a Mādiga is to "promote communion with the spirit that was worshipped" (Whitehead 1907:181). By bringing examples from Africa, where "the exchange of blood is often practiced amongst the blacks of Africa, as a token of alliance and friendship" (Whitehead 1907:179), he concludes:

> These examples will suffice to illustrate the widespread idea that the actual drinking or application of the blood of a clan will create a blood-relationship and alliance among men, who are not actually members of the same family. It can easily be seen, then, how readily this idea would extend to the sphere of religion in what is generally known as the totemistic stage. (Whitehead 1907:180)

29 However, Whitehead's interpretation of buffalo sacrifice as totemism was not widely shared by his contemporaries. Edgar Thurston, who himself conducted his own fieldwork amongst Mādigas at Hospet in Bellary district, quoted Whitehead's reports on buffalo sacrifice, but instead of emphasizing the theories of totemism, he chose to focus on Mādiga reluctance, or even fear, regarding their designated roles. Leading the procession and scattering the blood-rice appear to have been particularly problematic for the Mādigas. Apart from the case reported by Whitehead himself, Thurston reproduced several other cases originally reported by Fred Fawcett in Bellary, in which Mādigas were terrified to perform their tasks. He describes how, after the sacrifice, a Mādiga leads the procession going around the village:

> [A] Madiga, naked but for a few Margosa leaves, and held by two others, leading the way. Behind him are all the other Madigas, carrying 600 seers of cooked cholum (Shorghum: millet), which they scatter; and, following them, all the other villagers. It is daybreak, and the Madiga who led the way, the pujari (priest), and the women who followed him, who have been fasting for more than twenty-four hours, now eat. The Madiga is fed. This Madiga is said to be in mortal terror while leading the procession, for the spirit of influence of the goddess comes over him. He swoons before the procession is completed. (quoted in Thurston 1909:311–12)[19]

30 Thurston also appears to have been interested in collecting various legends explaining that Mādigas were the original rulers of the region and the reasons why they became untouchables. His fascination with the origin legends of Dalits seems to reflect the racial theory of the Aryans and Dravidians which had been in vogue since the mid-nineteenth century. Probably not as he intended, Thurston's writing on the legends became in later years an important literary source for Dalit intellectuals to claim and enhance their respectability (Singh 1969:7–8).[20]

Structuralist analysis and another suppression

31 It is rather surprising that the same scholars who have relied so heavily on the descriptions of buffalo rituals proposed by Whitehead, Thurston and Elmore, have seemingly not been interested in the mythical connection between Dalits and buffaloes. Those who wrote about goddess worship in southern India in the 1970s and 80s appear

to have been more interested in the functions of the rituals for the entire village community, leaving the position of Dalits aside as a minor concern.

32 One of the most troubling but nonetheless influential interpretations of goddess worship is found in the writings of David Kinsley. In his comprehensive book on Hindu goddesses (1986), he reduces several Māramma origin myths, including the main myth of a Brahmin woman mistakenly marrying a Dalit man, to variations on a simple theme concerning injustices done to women by men (see p. 200). It is rather difficult to understand how the story of an untouchable man marrying a Brahmin woman and being killed by her was treated as an exploration of a theme similar to that of the great goddess who gave birth to the three great gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. In the second narrative, the great goddess wished to marry her sons in order to continue the sacred creation, but was subsequently destroyed by one of her sons to whom she had given her middle eye, the symbol of her primordial power (Kinsley 1986:201). Unless we ignore the status of Dalits in the caste hierarchy of Hindu society and the crucial link between Dalits and buffaloes, we cannot possibly equate a powerless untouchable man killed by a high caste woman with a great god who destroys his mother because she tried to commit the sin of incest. Since Kinsley used the works of Whitehead and Elmore as his main source for village goddess rituals, he should have been aware of the clear linkage between the buffalo and the Dalit husband. He, however, continued to ignore the existence of Dalits:

> The festival also has an invigorating, enlivening effect on the village and its occupants. To a great extent, the villagers identify themselves with the goddess in her encounter with the invading demons. Like her and with her, they are aroused, invaded and assaulted by these "outsider" forces that disrupt the calm and order of the world. (Kinsley 1986:206)

33 In his interpretation, villagers identify themselves with the goddess who fights against an invading demon=outsider, and through the ritual the village invigorates itself, but Dalits are clearly pushed out of this "village."

34 Other highly celebrated interpretations of the worship of village goddesses also failed to pay any meaningful attention to the position of Dalits. Brenda E. F. Beck (1981), for example, was interested in the wedding ceremony between the village goddess and the demon. By using her own ethnographical research in a small temple in Tamil Nadu and many historical surveys, including those of Whitehead and Elmore, Beck did consider the role of untouchables in the goddess festival and the identification of a buffalo demon with a male member of a local untouchable community (Beck 1982:124–25). She was also interested in seemingly transgressive behavior, such as that exhibited by a special Dalit person called a Matangi who is allowed to shout insults at Brahmins and even to spit at them (Beck 1982:117). Beck did not, however, address the fact that Dalits were quite often reluctant to perform the roles clearly mentioned in the colonial descriptions. In a typically structuralist manner, she concludes that:

> The social structure of these same rituals also brings together various social groups in the area, particularly the two hierarchical extremes: Brahman and Untouchable. The result of all this activity is more than a simple renewal of a social fabric. When the goddess comes home to earth things are also stirred up. During this temporary reproachment [sic] between divine and human, some kind of cosmic reenergizing seems to occur. A fresh infusion of well-being flows from her presence and from a general lessening of categorical boundaries. With this goes the reversal of certain familiar roles. Within each local area these celebrations provide an eloquent testimony to common bonds. The strands of fellowship include a host of social

> interdependencies, as well as an extensively shared backdrop of mythic and moral concerns. (Beck 1981:132–33)

35 I am not sure how the identification of the buffalo-demon with male members of a local untouchable community who are often "thought to be demon-like, locally because of their low status, generally black skins, and (presumed) sexual prowess" (Beck 1981:125) could be considered to represent "the reversal of certain familiar roles." In her schematization, the village goddess festival is merely a temporary inversion of society in order to reinforce and revitalize the social bond amongst interdependent castes of the village where Dalits are always despised and exploited.[21]

36 In the 1990s, probably with the waning of structuralism, scholars began to question the supposed "organic solidarity" of the village. C. J. Fuller, for example, allocates one section of a chapter to "the position of the Harijans" in his seminal book on popular Hinduism, *The Camphor Flame* (1992:137–39). By analyzing the ethnographic descriptions of village rituals such as those amongst Coorgs presented by M. N. Srinivas (1965), Fuller points out the ambiguous position of Dalits (there called Harijans). They are required to be an inclusive part of festival rituals as musicians and sometimes sacrificial slaughterers but at the same time the rituals themselves exclude them as polluting agents. Dalits are included precisely as "symbolic denizens of the exterior in opposition to which the village is represented as a civilized centre" (Fuller 1992:139). Their ambiguous position in the ritual is thus not marginal but "intrinsic to the ritualization of village unity" (Fuller 1992:139). The buffalo sacrifice is the most acute example of this ritual reconstitution of village hierarchy and the exclusion of Dalits. It requires both the participation of Dalits and their humiliation at the same time.

Dalit refusal of buffalo sacrifice

37 We should not mistake the new phenomenon of Dalit defiance for a simple act of Sanskritization. Their refusal to participate in the buffalo sacrifice does not mean that they aspire to be like Brahmins who uphold the ideas of purity (*shudhi*) and non-violence (*ahimsa*). They do sacrifice goats and chickens and happily consume meat (including buffalo meat). The key issue here is who is the beneficiary of the sacrifice.[22] The buffalo sacrifice for Māramma is allegedly for the entire village, however it is primarily the hereditary village leaders from the dominant castes who usually bear its cost. When Olivier Herrenschmidt observed the rituals related to buffalo sacrifice (but not the sacrifice itself) in 1976 in coastal Andhra,[23] he similarly concluded that the festival of the village patron goddess is indeed for the village, but the real unity of the village was constituted around the power of the village head (Herrenschmidt 1981:167–68). Thus, although Dalits who play their traditional roles in the ritual are given a share of buffalo meat, they are not considered direct beneficiaries of the sacrifice as they are not even proper members of the village.[24]

38 Refusing to participate in the buffalo sacrifice is not an entirely new phenomenon. Dalits were already reluctant to play their dedicated roles in the early twentieth century and village heads had to give out generous rewards to persuade them (Thurston 1909:312–13; Whitehead 1907:139). This earlier refusal or reluctance was, however, due to a deep fear of being possessed or attacked by evil spirits or demons. By the mid-twentieth century, a new interpretation of their role in the goddess worship appears to have emerged. Kathleen Gough (1989), for example, reported as early as the

late 1960s, that it became impossible in many parts of Thanjavur district in Tamil Nadu to continue the traditional village goddess festivals (see p. 349). This was partly because of official pressure against animal sacrifice, but also because Dalits refused to play a role that "reflected their servitude" (Gough 1989:349). Here their strategy was not to necessarily deny the goddess worshipping itself but to create a separate ritual for themselves. In order to claim equality in the ritual world, some Dalits, who had probably acquired some financial power, held a separate but identical festival of their own with equal grandeur outside of the goddess temple. Some also organized small festivals in their own streets with humble mud images of the idol (Gough 1989:515).

39 Another example of Dalit defiance comes from the small town of Mahepura, which lies immediately south of Chitradurga district in Karnataka. In 1995, Neil Armstrong witnessed the festival of a village goddess named Durgamma there and gave a detailed account (Armstrong 1998:161–63). He describes a series of rituals involving all the town's caste groups that is incredibly similar to those festivals recorded in the early twentieth century. The origin myth of Māramma/Durgamma collected by Armstrong also predominantly follows the same structure—a Brahmin woman unknowingly marries a Dalit man—with some minor differences (Armstrong 1998:160). In Mahepura, the attitude of Mādigas towards the buffalo sacrifice appears to have been highly complex. They took pride in killing the beast (in Mahepura, Mādigas are the executioners, unlike in Tumakuru) and in engaging with their prescribed ritual roles for the good of the village (Armstrong 1998:164), despite the fact that these roles were polluting and dangerous. Many Mādigas saw no point in objecting to their involvement in polluting work, which was seen by some as a right (Armstrong 1998:164). However, the younger and more politicized members refused to take part in the buffalo sacrifice, participating only in the same rituals as the other castes (Armstrong 1998:163). Their reasoning was that continuing to take part in polluting work only maintained "their reputation as low and disreputable people" (Armstrong 1998:164). Armstrong describes a multifaceted Dalit identity determined by manifold and contrasting principals of ritual purity, the internal power structure and rapidly changing political cultures of the region. Also, in Mahepura, the assertive position of the buffalo sacrifice was in decline as the magical power of the goddess was replaced by the advent of allopathic medicine and secular urban culture. Indeed, the buffalo sacrifice for the lesser goddesses in the town had already been discontinued by the Dalits themselves.

Original inhabitants and the Dravidians as a nation

40 As we have seen, Dalit defiance was described in the colonial accounts but was not sufficiently attended to by later modern scholars. There is, however, also a less known but continuous lineage of ideas that provides a context for this development. The narrative at the heart of these ideas posits that Dalits are an indigenous nation of people who were conquered by invading Aryans and then forced or tricked into a position of humiliation and subjugation.

41 Scottish orientalist and civil servant Walter Elliot witnessed a buffalo sacrifice in southern Maratha country in 1829 (Elliot 1869–70:96–100). His description may be the oldest detailed account of the festival. It seems that he was unaware of the origin myth of Māramma and thus regarded the buffalo sacrifice simply as an opportunity for Dalits to assert themselves. In addition, he imagined that there was a link between "human

sacrifice," supposed to have been practiced amongst hill tribes, and the buffalo sacrifice in southern India. Nonetheless, he also claimed that the position that Dalits (who he referred to as the "Parias") "occupied in native society, at some former period, was very different from what it is now, and much more honourable" and that "they were once an independent people with kings of their own" (Elliot 1869–70:101). In making these claims he was relying on the works of Francis Whyte Ellis[25] and Robert Caldwell, who had both contributed to the discovery of the Dravidian language family. Quoting Ellis, Elliot continued to state that the "Pareiyer" in Arcot affected "to consider themselves as the real proprietors of the soil" (Elliot 1869–70:101). He also utilized epigraphical studies that had been gathering a vast corpus of information concerning India's forgotten past since the late eighteenth century. In his reading of the Kapurdagiri inscription of Asoka's edict enumerating the southern nations, Elliot asserted that "the Parayas are named in the very centre of the Dravidian group, … which, if it holds good, supplied a satisfactory explanation of the origin of the Paria name and *nation*" (Elliot 1869–70:103, emphasis mine).

42 There is no doubt that colonialist knowledge production provided a source of information that was both authoritative and inspirational for the neo-Buddhist intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Iyothee Thass. The thread of Dalit intellectualism that issued forth from this conjunction resulted in the mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism led by B. R. Ambedkar in 1956. The idea that Dalits were the original inhabitants of the land and an independent nation of people survived in the minds of Dalit intellectuals while the social scientists of the twentieth century were more concerned with the creation or discovery of a coherent national culture and religion.

43 Although M. C. Raj had some reservations about Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, there is still an echo of Ambedkar in Raj's new spiritualism *Booshakti* (the Power of Earth). As Vidhu Verma argues in this issue, for Ambedkar, conversion meant "recovery" from sickness and Raj called for the healing of wounds that Dalits had carried on their body and soul for two millennia. Buddhism for Ambedkar was the recovery of the original Dalit values which Brahmanism had later concealed by introducing the hierarchical caste system. For Raj, nature worship must be seen as part of the long history of Dalit efforts to discover their own voices, selfhood, and forgotten history as the original people of the land.[26] While Ambedkar imagined that Dalits could recover full membership of the political community within the secular state through religious conversion, Raj's Adijan Panchayat movement aimed to create a parallel and equal governing body within the democratic system. M. C. Raj's uniqueness lay in his pragmatic approach that enabled Dalits to continue co-existing with caste Hindus within village society while at the same time asserting their identity and new selfhood. This, however, could never be a final objective and would inevitably be challenged by caste Hindus.

Conclusion

44 To exercise their agency or even to claim to have agency in village India is still too risky and possibly life threatening for many Dalits. The majority of them are still employed as agricultural laborers and thus any defiance against landed dominant castes could lead to a significant loss of income and further retaliation. Atrocities against Dalits

need to be understood in this context since the violence is often exercised under the guise of punishment or sanctions to prevent the breaking of norms and rules by Dalits (Berg 2020).

45 The attitude of Dalits or Mādigas towards Buffalo sacrifice is multifaceted. Some still fear the power of the goddess Māramma and refuse to enter her shrine even though temple entry has been legally secured for many decades. Some take pride in the completion of their traditional and dangerous role in the festival, which they see as manly and courageous. Relatively younger and better educated Dalits now consider the entire ritual humiliating. However, there is indisputably a clear divide between Dalits and caste Hindus in the village ceremonies and the ritual of Māramma does not erase but rather enforces it.

46 We have only recently recognized the inadequacy of some scholarship of the 1970s and 80s concerning buffalo sacrifice. We may attribute our twenty-first century perspective to the so-called "historic turn" of the social sciences and the development of postcolonial studies that began in the 1990s. These academic trends turned our attention towards the historical construction undertaken by the colonial regime, particularly in relation to caste and Hinduism, and the artificiality of what we believed to be unchanging primordial "traditions" (Dirks 1989, 2001; Frykenberg 1989, to name a few). The postcolonial re-reading of colonial ethnographies was conducted in accordance with the new guiding principles of Subaltern Studies, which endeavored to rescue the voices and agency of "subalterns" from colonial and nationalist historiographies of modern India. These developments helped to direct scholarly attention towards the political dimension of seemingly benign social science research. Most significantly, postcolonial studies deconstructed the structuralist schematization of Indian society as an unchanging and harmonious system in which castes are mutually interdependent and in possession of unique roles in society. Although scholars of colonialism had always been conscious of the political tension between the elites and subalterns and between colonialism and the native society, there was a glaring neglect of the tension between Dalits and the rest of the society. There is, as Rupa Viswanath (2014) points out, an irony in how through their attempt "to avoid defaming the victims of colonialism [they] may be complicit in a long history of silencing the victims of those victims" (p. 242).

47 Recent anthropological works on animal sacrifice reveal the violence, exclusion and coercion present in the sacrifice, rather than unity and incorporation. Indira Arumugam has shown that during the street goddess festival in Tamil Nadu people belonging to the artisan caste were obliged to receive sacrificial meat despite the fact that they did not want the mediocre and meagre meat. They receive this "coercive gift" in fear that they will be blamed or worse beaten up by the dominant Kallars (Arumugam 2019). In Diane Mines' now classic work *Fierce Gods* (2005), we can see that the temple of the goddess in a village of Tamil Nadu is purportedly for the "whole village" but who actually belongs to this village is severely contested and challenged, and has drastically changed over the past decades. We can thus understand that the recent Dalit defiance in Tumakuru, Karnataka is part of a continuously contested and politically charged sacrificial ritual tradition in south India and that their departure from it is a radical but not unreasonable move.

48 This article has traced a hidden current of Dalit assertion that emerged in the late nineteenth century from an ironical dialogue between Dalit intellectuals and colonial

anthropologists or Christian missionaries, who also regarded Dalits as dirty, dangerous and prone to criminality. The idea of the Dravidians as a nation, birthed in the same period, has remained a source of inspiration in the processes of selfhood and identity formation among Dalits. By referring to themselves as Adijans (original people) in movements like that led by M. C. Raj, this marginalized group not only challenges the historical humiliation they suffered for centuries, but also creates the opportunity to forge new alliances with South Asian tribal populations and native inhabitants across the world.

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NOTES

1. Animal sacrifice within the temple compounds has been illegal for more than a half century in Karnataka but many Hindus have continued performing animal sacrifice in the vicinity of and sometimes within Hindu temples. Prior to 1960, there were two laws preventing animal sacrifice in or within the precincts of Hindu temples: the Mysore Prevention of Animal Sacrifices Act of 1948 and the Madras Animals and Birds Sacrifices Prohibition Act of 1950. However, areas which did not previously fall within Mysore Princely State or the Madras Presidency were not covered. The Karnataka Prevention of Animal Sacrifices Act of 1959 was thus created in order to extend the legal coverage to the whole of the state. It also expanded the definition of "precincts" to cover not only Hindu temples but also "public religious worship or adoration." However, the state which should uphold the law, seemingly turned a blind eye to animal sacrifices for many years (see Ikegame Forthcoming).

2. On the issue of secrecy surrounding this prevention, see Ikegame (Forthcoming).

3. Interviews with activists, NGO workers and some villagers in Tumakuru district were sporadically conducted as a part of a larger study on religious leaders in central Karnataka carried out between 2012 and 2017.

4. From an interview with M. C. Raj in August 2016 at Booshakti Kendra. Social boycotts included a fine of Rs. 500 if village stores sold goods to Dalits, and the prohibition of Dalit use of public wells.

5. From an interview with NGO worker Preetam Casimir in March 2017.

6. Renowned Kannada author Arvind Malagatti sarcastically titled his book *Government Brahmana* ([1994] 2007). In it he narrates upper castes' everyday insults towards Dalit people in higher education institutions.

7. Despite the acceptance of the rise of the Dalits amongst the dominant castes, Dalit assertiveness has often been met with collective punishment and violence from caste Hindus who think that they have the right to "teach them a lesson" (see the discussion on the PoA Act of 1989, Berg [2020], chapter 2).

8. Raj was born as the son of an illiterate servant working in a leprosy hospital run by a Christian mission in the town of Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu (Rawat 2017). Despite his modest background, Raj excelled in school and studied theology at a postgraduate level in an elite Christian seminary. Throughout his youth, he experienced extreme poverty, severe bullying and caste discrimination which he describes in his auto-biographical novel *Raachi* (Raj 2011).

9. Raj and Jyothi started REDS in 1984. The size of the organization changes depending on the available external funding. It hired more than 100 coordinators in the 2010s but now the number has shrunk to less than 20.

10. The Booshakri Kendra was established sometime in the early 2000s. It has a main building in which Raj, his wife Jyothi, and their son live, and many small cottages where visitors can stay. It also has a large hall where most of the training sessions have been conducted. There are no permanent residents apart from themselves, although Raj's supporters and local Dalit leaders often visit the place.

11. In the early nineteenth century, Christian missionaries saw them as occupying the "in-between position" between the lowest strata of Sudras and outcaste untouchables (Hardgrave 1969:22). Their occupation as toddy-tappers was defined as impure and they were forbidden entry to Hindu temples, but they were allowed to have access to the streets of the Brahmin quarter (agrahara) unlike other Dalit communities like Pallar and Paraiyar (ibid.:23).

12. For the ambiguous status of Nadars, see Good (1999).

13. The interview was conducted in English and recorded at the Booshakti Kendra on the 11th August 2016.

14. One notable exception is the story presented by A. K. Ramanujan in which Mariamma was a sage's wife and executed by him (Ramanujan 1973:24). At the time of execution, she embraced a Dalit woman, Ellamma. Both the Dalit and Brahmin women lost their heads. Later the husband relented and restored their heads by his spiritual powers but misplaced their heads to the wrong bodies. Wendy Doniger takes this as an important example of the fact that "(t)he mixing together of various human streams is so basic to the history of Hinduism that the Brahmins could not stop trying and failing to prevent it" (Doniger 2009:63). Dalit defiance in this article might be considered to be Dalit departure from that mixture which can be both oppressive and liberating.

15. The earliest description in English was probably the article by Fred Fawcett, "On some festivals to village goddesses," published in *the Journal of Anthropological Society of Bombay* in 1890.

16. *Madras Government Museum Bulletin* 5(3).

17. Asādis are a sub-caste group of Mādigas and they are believed to be descendants of the last child of Māramma whom she failed to kill.

18. According to M. C. Raj, the Asādi's chant not only praises of the goddess but also criticisms of her for her cruelty as a mother.

19. Thurston's gives the reference a *Manual of the Bellary district*, but the actual quote is probably taken from Fawcett 1890:276.

20. According to T. R. Singh, in 1928, Guruswamy, the one-time president of the Gadavari Adi-Andra Matanga Conference said "it is a common tradition among us that we are descended from Jambavan, a well-known general in the army Sugriva, ... Our country, India ..., is known as 'Jambudweepam' or the 'Island of Jambu' and its early inhabitants, we are known as Jambuvans ... we were the masters of the country" (1969:7–8). Unfortunately, T. R. Singh does not give a complete reference to this quote.

21. In a more recent feminist reading of animal sacrifice for a lineage deity, Isabelle Nabokov has argued that women, like Dalits, are also excluded despite being invited. In the lineage sacrifice, "women are held responsible for all that is inherently negative and disruptive for the descent group" (Nabokov 2000:176).

22. I am extremely grateful to Dr Emmanuel Francis for pointing this out to me during the seminar he invited me to at the Centre d'étude de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud, Paris in November 2017.

23. Herrenschmidt was not able to witness the sacrifice itself even in 1976 because of the official prohibition of animal sacrifice in the region.

24. On the contested nature of who belongs to the village, see Mines (2005).

25. Francis Whyte Ellis died unexpectedly young in 1819 and thus the honor of the discovery of Dravidian language family mistakenly often goes to Robert Caldwell's book *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian South-Indian Family of Languages* which was not published until 1856 (Trautmann 2006).
26. The shift from calling themselves Dalits to Adijan needs to be added to the long history of this group's own challenge to their problematic categorization as "untouchables" (see Charsley 1996).

ABSTRACTS

Taking a cue from the recent prevention of a buffalo sacrifice to a powerful local goddess in Karnataka and the writings of Dalit activist-turned-spiritual-guru M. C. Raj, this article traces a history of how buffalo sacrifice has been witnessed, described and analyzed from the mid nineteenth to the twentieth century. This endeavor reveals how structural-functionalist understandings of the ritual obscured the voice of Dalit dissent while stressing the organic unity of the village as a whole. This was despite the fact that colonial accounts, relied upon in later studies, clearly documented the reluctance of Dalits to participate. This article also finds within colonial writings an unexpected description of Dalits as original inhabitants of the land, an idea that has been revived in contemporary movements of Dalit assertion.

INDEX

Keywords: Dalit assertion, sacrifice, village goddess, Karnataka, South India

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