

Social and Economic Profile of Mala Mastis of Andhra Pradesh- A Select Study

Dr. J. Chalapathi Rao (Assistant Professor)

Department of History Kasthurba College for Women Villianur, Puducherry

Abstract:- The Indian caste system is arduous to understand. It raised uncountable questions and created plenty of problems in Indian society and one such was the creation of untouchables. The typical character of caste system in India in general and particular in Andhra Pradesh within each caste there are a number of sub- divisions including the dependent community. They are panegyrist, preservers of the origin myths and the bygone traditions of their patron castes and by virtue of it they depend on them for their livelihood. Andhra Pradesh has a number of untouchable castes amongst the Mala and the Madiga are numerous presently called them as the Dalits. The Mala community is one of the numerically superior Dalit groups of Andhra Pradesh and having their own servicing and dependent castes known as Mala Mashti, Mala Jangam, Chalwadi (messengers of death news), Bhat Mala, Gurram Mala etc. Syed Siraj-ul- Hassan also attests that there were thirty seven Mala sub-groups in the erstwhile Nizam territory. The paper focused to study life, culture and relation with their patron caste of the Mala Mastis and the manuscript is written based on the colonial ethnographic records coupled with field study.

Keywords:- Panegyrist, Chalwadi (Messengers of Death News), Preservers, Mala- Mashti.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Mala community, the largest Telugu Dalit group and was the erstwhile untouchable group distributed over a wider area of south India, their main habitation being the present Andhra Pradesh state. C.P. Brown considered that the name of the community derived from 'maila' meaning dirty. Quite interestingly, the word 'Mala' was referred to untouchability and not to a community in the early pure Telugu literary works Basava Puranam and Sri Panditharadhy Charitra of Palkuriki Somanatha.¹ It is clueless as and when a specific social group was known as Mala. The exact reason for their untouchability is not precisely known though there are many contesting theories. Thurston in his ethnography of South India informs that the Malas were basically weavers and agricultural labours. Now a microscopic minority of the community are eking their livelihood from the former and the bulk of them are engaged in the later profession. At many places the people of the community are associated with the disposal of dead. Thurston informs that "they eat beef and drink heavily and debarred entrance to the temples and the use of ordinary wells and have to serve as their own barbers and washermen"² They used to lie in separated quarters named

as *petas* or *pallis* away from the main villages. During colonial period they were employed as servants of the Europeans as cooks, housekeepers and performers of menial labour. They are divided into numerous endogamous groups and the ethnographers, so far, identified thirty seven such groups. For example Thurston divides the Malas into four major sub-divisions namely Reddi Bhumi, Pokunati, Sarindla and Daindla and they were again subdivided into 17, 11, 17 and 8 respectively. They also include the satellite/dependent communities like Mala Masti, Bhat Mala, Gurram Mala etc.³

II. ETYMOLOGICAL HISTORY

The origin of the name Mala Masti seems to have derived from a caste, Mala and a profession, wrestling. The Suryaraayaandhra Nighantuvu informs that the meaning of Mastidu as *surudu* that means a brave or valiant man, a hero and a champion and another meaning was *Malludu* or *Jatti* which means a wrestler.⁴ Hence the Mala Mastis might to be a brave and valiant man or a wrestler belonging or associated with the erstwhile untouchable community, the Malas. It should be borne in mind that once Andhra region was renowned for its wrestlers and wrestling. For supporting this imaginary thought a copper plate commendation issued by Krishna Deva Raya in 1515 A.D. to a group of Veera Mala Mushtis and Veera Madiga Mushti were recruited as soldiers by him.⁵ Recently this copper plate Telugu inscription weighing around two kg and dating back to around 1515 A.D. was brought and came to light at Farijallipeta near Rajanagaram in East Godavari District.

➤ *Mashti Tradition*

The ethnographical records described that there are two kinds of Mashtis known as Mala Mashtis and Madiga Mashtis. These two castes are the dependent communities of the Mala and Madigas respectively and get their sustenance from them. A Christian missionary working under Rev. John Cain at Dummagudem referred a word Mastilu, a group of people who "beg from Gollas, Malalu and Madigalu only and are regarded as low in the social scale".⁶ Thurston informs that the Mastigas were the beggars of both Mala and Madigas. They may enter the settlements but not into the houses of the patrons. When engaged in beseeching the Mala Mastigas narrate the stories of Ankamma whereas Madiga Mashtigas sing songs to praise the Madigas.⁷ R.V. Russell communicated that the Mastis were one of the sub-caste and dancers of Madiga at Chanda district in Central Provinces of India.⁸ Syed Siraj Ul Hassan also mentioned two low caste Mashtis. "The Mashti Madiga are story tellers and beggars, occasionally exhibiting acrobatic feats before

the public” and the “Mala Mashti are acrobats and earn their living by performing physical feats”.⁹ Paul G. Hiebert declared that Mala Mashtis are Mala transit caste¹⁰ or symbiotic caste. They are mainly circus performers and entertainers for the Mala community. The Mala Mastis are an indigenous nomadic people spread in two Telugu states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana but fairly large in Andhra Pradesh¹¹ and lesser in Telangana, in the same way Madiga Mashtis are large number in Telangana and meager in Andhra.

➤ *Mala Mashti*

The Mala Mashtis are roving acrobats. They were also referred to as Mala Mastidi, Mala Machachetti and Mala Machattiollu among their patron social group, the Malas. Seeking alms is their traditional occupation and they beg only from Malas. The Mala Mashtis possessed copper plates on which the Royal orders are given, right to collect alms from the patron caste Mala and the fees prescribed for their acrobatic and power shows. So they collect money, grain, clothes and utensils, receiving their marriage expenses and getting cattle from the main Mala caste. Owing to the generous attitude of the patron caste is rewarded by the periodic praise singings from the dependent caste.¹² They visit the hamlets of their specific patrons periodically and entertain them by their songs, dances and display of acrobatics. They display feats like lifting weights, somersaults, taking a dashing ram on their chests, tossing a heavy object into the air and hit with their shoulder and chest, breaking the stones with bare hands, pulling bullock carts by their hair etc. The Mashtis are experts in sword, stick plays and are known for their extraordinary physical prowess. They even train the Mala youth in stick play (*karra sadhanam*) early in the morning for self defence.¹³

III. RELATION BETWEEN PATRON CASTE AND MALA MASHTI

Mala Mashtis have enormous respect, faithfulness and gratitude towards their patron community and never sit before them. They praised them as “Royal Patrons” and they themselves labelled as “Faithful servants My Lords”. There is controversy of relations between patron community and Mashti.¹⁴ The nomadic group of Mala Masti consists of 7-12 persons, mostly families and related members visit the Mala hamlets and stay there for a specific period near goddess shrines, common places are by the side of Mala houses. The elder of the nomadic group (the group is identified by his name) informs the Mala elders of their arrival and seeks their cooperation. They remind the Malas that it is their responsibility to take care of them as they are their masters (Doras). They call the Malas as Doras and lift them on their shoulders, turn up their moustache, stroking up their morale. In the evening the Mala Masti goes to every house in the Mala hamlet singing songs (*padalu adatam*), playing drums to receive food. Each person in the hamlet is considered as relative and the fictive kinship continues for generations. The Mashtin remained each Mala of such relation existing from their grandparents and ask the younger generation to oblige their responsibility.¹⁵

➤ *Mala Mashti –Soldiers of Mala*

Jeedigunta Bushanam who belongs to the patron community of Mala Mashti said that “Mala Mashtis are soldiers or protectors of our community. In 1980, Atriyapuram, East Godavari District caste Mala bridegroom ride on horse then the Kshatriya youngsters attacked bridegroom and ousted out from the horse. The community of Mala cannot resist and fight the Kshatriyas. Then they organised a meeting and finally decided and invited the Mala Mashti to protect them from Kshatriyas. The Mala Mashtigas reached and went to Kshatriya streets and challenged them to attack on their royal patrons later the Kshatriyas went for compromise. According to compromise the Kshatriyas promised never oppose Mala for riding horse during marriage ceremonies. Like this whenever their Royal patrons were in trouble Mashtis protected. So the Mala Mashtis are the soldiers or protectors and entertainers of the patron community.¹⁶

The Mala Mashtis are suppose to be the defenders of Malas and are considered to keep up the honour and prestige of Mala. They are several myths and episodes that explain the role of Mala Mashti as the musclemen of Mala. The Malas used to serve as the tenders of horses, elephants of Rajas and Zamindars before the construction of Davaleswaram barrage. Later when the lands became highly fertile, as a result of the irrigation project, the Malas could gain some control over the lands. A stiff competition over land resulted in several conflicts and it was reported that the Mala Mashti stood by the Malas in many bloody conflicts with other castes.¹⁷ About the valour of Mala Mashti there was popular saying stated that

Mastillunna chote Malodiki polam MigilindiMachetti pika teginake malodi mida cheyypaduddhi

It means where the Malas hold of the land, the Mala Mashtis be there. The Malas were touched when cut off the head of Machetti.¹⁸

The Malas used to feel that it is their responsibility to take care of the Mala Mashti because the Malas satisfy by their expression of respect and reverence in the caste system of graded inequality.

➤ *Social Profile of Mala Mashti*

Like the patron community the Mala Mashtis also followed patrilinear system in that the family names and clans play derived from male line in their social order. The surname groups are an important role denoted as *Kutumbam* and the fraternal surname groups join together as on *sangham* (the grand council). The surname pratti, talluri and sikile belong to one sangham while malesetti, kaki, nalaka and vaddi belong to another and the surnames medi, malareddy and pulagara constitute another *sangham*.¹⁹

The surname groups Trimella, Konta²⁰ Prathi, Talluri, Sikile, Malesetti, Kaki, Nalaka and Vaddi²¹ are distributed all over East Godavari district and also the adjacent mandals of Visakhapatnam district. They are found predominantly in Korukonda near Rajahmundry Atchutapuram, Kirlampudi,

Prathipadu, Yellanka, Peddapuram, Samalkota, Pitapuram, Katrenikona, Tallarevu, Pathigondi, Torredu, Kotapadu, Narsipudi, Rangampeta²² Ganti and Farijallipeta²³ mandals of East Godavari districts. The surname groups Medy, Malareddy and Pulagara are reported to be distributed in Bhimavaram,²⁴ Siddantham, East Viparru and Gajjeram²⁵ in West Godavari district.

Each surname group is having headmen who regulate their activities and resolve disputes among them. There is a clan level organization of headmen called sangham or grand council in which the elders of these surname groups meet once in three years on the day of *kotta amavasya* (new moon day). The clan of Prathi meets in Vadapalem, Kothapeta mandal, East Godavari District at parentala marri (banyan tree).²⁶ The clan of Kaki meets at Samarlakota while the clan of Medy assembles at Bhimavaram. As the apex body of the clan, the sangham, decides and regulates the migratory routes of each group. The headmen resolves disputes among the surname groups, imposes fines, coordinates the activities of *Aata* (the acrobatics display) and take decisions on behalf of clan.²⁷

➤ *Aata (the Acrobatics Display)*

With the consultation of the village headmen, the *aata* is organised by the Mashti group leader who summons his team, when the villagers agree to bear the expenses of the event. There are different teams of acrobats (*pahilwans*) known either by village name or by leading *pahilwan's* name such as Narsipudi team, Korukonda team, Patti Hanumanthu team, Talluri team etc. the team requires 15 members-two drummers (*Dappulu*), two big drummers (*Bherilu*), one comedian (*hasikalu cheppevadu*) and assistants (*joda*), four *pehilwans* who can lift 20, 50 and 60 stone weights and four youngsters to display feats of somersaults. They also display feats like taking a dashing ram on their chests, pulling bullock carts and tractor trailers by their hair etc. The leader of the team coordinates all these activities, collects and disburses gifts from the villagers.²⁸

They are endogamous at the community level. There is no evidence of child marriages but within their group the bridegroom parents decided the bride at child age after attaining puberty they marry them.²⁹ Cross- cousin and maternal uncle- niece marriages are preferred and child marriage is giving way to adult marriage.³⁰ When confront one another they say “Aden” or “Aden Dasayya” it means Namaskar and they also used some filthy words such as “Kangali” and “Bajaati” which means “useless fellow” and these words used commonly both men and women.³¹

Mala Mashti staple cereal is rice and they consume meat, fish, eggs, beef and pork. They smoke *chutta* made the leaves of tobacco as well as both men and women habitually drink toddy and arrack.³² In normal days they supplicate alms at the hands of the caste villagers. They never beseech and accept food from other caste groups a Mala Mashti said that “we are ready to eat the food vomited by our patron community man; although the delicious food is offered by others we never eat”. The caste villagers (Mala) in a village collect Re. 1 per house hold and pay the Mala Mashtis and

some of the households gave clothes when they asked. In addition to it they are offered food as long as they stay in a village by the patron caste. Now in a village voluntarily pay Rs 10 and more per household and some of them offered more than this amount.

➤ *Economic Profile of Mala Mashti*

The economic conditions of Mala Mashti are pathetic, worst, and poorest of the poor. They neither have lands for cultivation nor have permanent settlements for living. During the Krishnadevaraya period they were recruited as soldiers and might be led good life, now such empire had gone and lost their livelihood.

Every day in the morning up to 10 a.m. both men and women implore food from households. After that the men only leave for hunting birds with catapult. They trap birds, fish with hooks, hunt small game with catapult, sling and bowshot with *undelu*. The Mashti are expertise in using *undelu*.³³ The hunting birds are cranes, crows, mynahs, sparrows, pigeons, and parrots etc. These birds sell for rice and sometimes for money. If they get money after selling the birds, use for drinking alcohol. They beat the drum every evening at 5p.m. which is made out of cattle hides. The drum sound is indication for their existence in the village when they leave until that time they are beating the *Nagara* (drum). Night at 7 pm again they started beseeching food from households. This is the routine life for them. From the plains Mala Mashtis visit once in a year preferably in summer season. The male members of this community will supplicate while the women engage themselves on tattooing.³⁴

IV. HISTORY OF MALA MASHTI



Fig 1 Copper plate citation of 1515

It is very difficult to know the complete history of Mala Mashti because no detailed study had been done for them. Some of the known facts and stray references were collected from monographs, books, census reports, ethnographic works and personal interviews which are helping compile the history of Mala Mashtis.

In *Palnati Viracharitra* the Telugu book edited by Umakantha Vidyasekharulu mentioned that the Mashtis had participated in the battle field of Karampoodi as soldiers holding straight *Bhairava* swords on the side of Kannamanedu.³⁵

Mala Mashti and Madiga Mashti are nomads survived more than three hundred years performing their martial arts in the hamlets of patrons. The men of these communities height was 6.5 inches to 7 feet as well as weight was 100 to 150 kilos because of their hefty bodies and martial skills Krishnadevaraya gave employment for them as soldiers in his army. A copper plate with a Telugu inscription was weighing around two kilos and dating back to around 1515 A.D. stated that the citation was given to Mala Mashtis by Emperor endorsed devoted soldiers in his army.³⁶ This inscription at present in East Godavari District, Andhra Pradesh.³⁷

In 1938 the Britishers gave a piece of land (nearly 248 yards) to the Mala Mashtis at Gummampadu village³⁸, Attili Mandal West Godavari District. Gollapalli Vivekananda resident of this village said that, when the Britishers visited the said village a Mala Mashti invited them with great veneration and performed their acrobatic feats. Then the Britishers impressed and bestowed a piece of land now that is called as 'mound of Mala Mashti'. This piece of land has given to their patron community in 1983.

In the procession of Dr B. R. Ambedkar's struggle for annihilation of caste Mala Mashti participated and they displayed acrobatic performances like somersault or cartwheel, beating Nagara, and Dappu. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar wrote in his diary about Mala Mashtis contribution in his struggle and it has been revealed by Prakash Ambedkar³⁹ the grandson of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in Rajahmundry congregation held in 2011. Kaki Peda Venkateswara Rao also informed that all the Mala Mashtis were invited in that time to participate in the congregation.

➤ *Changes Dependency Relations between Mala and Mala Mashtis*

The relations between the patron and dependency community (Mala and Mala Mashtis) have been gradually diminishing by many factors for last 60 years.

- Altering farming relations, commercialization of agriculture and industrialization initiated several modifications in between them.
- Use of technology in agriculture, introduce commercial crops like coconut, palm oil and aquaculture ensued substantially lessening the labour force in agriculture as of these consequences many Malas lost their employment and migrated to towns and cities also distant places like Ragoon and Gulf countries for seeking better source of income.
- Educational progression had provided employment among the Malas in Government and private sectors. It was an exemplary to encourage the younger generations to follow the same path and resulted to decline the

patron and dependency relations which they considered superfluous and obsolete.

- The system of globalization and privatization is indirectly upsetting the patron and dependency relations.
- The Mala Mashtis acrobatic feats, traditional songs and dances were lost their attractiveness gradually among the Malas because of the new forms of entertainments and technology like cinema, Television, computer, mobiles and internet have brought drastic change in the pattern of amusement to utilise their pastime.
- The Mala Mashtis have begun the cinema songs and imitated the dance of cinema heroes for continuing the dependency relations with disliked Malas. In some regions instead of traditional songs they commenced songs of Ambedkar and Christian songs for attracting the patron community. +

These factors brought the process of sedentarization and helping to prevent the nomadic patterns among the Mala Mashti. Some families and groups decided to leave nomadic life. Now we find nomads, semi-nomads and sedentarized nomads among the Mala Mashtis. About 20 families of Mala Mashti constructed permanent houses near Mala hamlet at Korukonda village, Rajahmundry and the house sites have been granted by the Government.⁴⁰ In many other places individual Mala Mashti families built houses in or around the Mala hamlets. Since the Malas at many places rejected the residence of Mala Mashti among their houses as they despise the Mala Mashti as inferior. So the cycle social exclusion continues in the society and so far the Governments could not eradicate caste inequalities.

V. CONCLUSION

The Mala community is the largest Telugu Dalit group and was ex-untouchable group spreading over two Telugu states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana as well as the other south India states. The early Telugu literary works Basava Puranam and Sri Panditharadhya Charitra of Palkuriki Somanatha referred the word Mala as synonym to untouchability or pollution rather than the community. It is uncertain or clueless as and when this specific social group known as Mala. They were basically weavers and agricultural labours. Ethnographers stated that they are divided into numerous endogamous groups and also include the satellite/dependent communities. One such community is Mala Mashti. The origin of the name Mala Mashti seems to have derived from a caste, Mala and a profession, wrestling. Hence the Mala Mashtis might to be a brave and valiant man or a wrestler belonging or associated with the erstwhile untouchable community, the Malas. The Mala Mashtis are the dependent communities of the Mala and get their livelihood from them. The Mala Mastis are an indigenous nomadic people spread in two Telugu states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana but fairly large in Andhra Pradesh. They were also referred to as Mala Mastidi, Mala Machachetti and Mala Machattiollu among their patron social group, the Malas. Ethnographers stated that they are mainly circus performers and entertainers for the Mala community. Seeking alms is their traditional occupation and

they beg only from Malas. But some of the patron community people declared that they are the soldiers or protectors and entertainers of the patron community.

They are endogamous at the community level. There is no evidence of child marriages but within their group the bridegroom parents decided the bride at child age after attaining puberty they marry them. They never beseech and accept food from other caste groups. The caste villagers (Mala) in a village collect Re. 1 per house hold and pay the Mala Mashtis and some of the households gave clothes when they asked. Every day in the morning up to 10 am both men and women implore food from households. After that the men only leave for hunting birds with catapult. They beat the drum every evening at 5.p m. which is made out of cattle hides. The drum sound is indication for their existence in the village when they leave until that time they are beating the *Nagara* (drum). Night at 7 pm again they started beseeching food from households. This is the routine life for them. The patron and dependency relations have been disappearing slowly because of commercialization and mechanization of agriculture ensued substantially lessening the labour force and the patron community (the Malas) migrated to other countries for better income. New forms of entertainments and technology like cinema, Television, computer, mobiles and internet also the main factors to distract the relations between them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am thankful to Dr. B. Rama Chandra Reddy, Associate Professor and Head of the Department of History, K. M. C. P. G. Studies and Research, Pondicherry, who gave me an idea to write this paper. I express deep gratitude to Prof. P.D.S. Paul Kumar, Anthropology Department, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam for providing source material to complete the paper.

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